Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language between Integration and Exclusion: The Romanian Language as Cultural Capital and Power Relations in the University Environment

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Abstract: This paper explores the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language within the broader sociological framework of integration and exclusion in the university environment. The study examines how the Romanian language serves as both a communication tool and a legitimate form of cultural capital that influences international students social positioning in Romanian universities, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and symbolic power. The paper focuses on the asymmetrical relationship between teachers and international students, the function of linguistic norms, and the mechanisms of evaluation and assessment in order to highlight the power relations ingrained in the pedagogical process. Although learning Romanian makes it easier to participate in school and integrate socially, unequal access to linguistic and cultural resources can also lead to processes of marginalization and symbolic exclusion. The study highlights how institutional norms, expectations, and power structures are inextricably linked to language learning by taking a sociological stance. The results highlight the necessity of inclusive and reflective teaching methods that recognize cultural diversity and lessen the symbolic obstacles that foreign students must overcome. This paper has theoretical academic value, contributing to the understanding of Romanian language teaching as a social phenomenon by integrating the concepts of cultural capital and power relations within the university context. It is relevant to the sociology of education, intercultural studies, and foreign language didactics, offering a reflective perspective on the integration of international students. In the end, the analysis makes the case that teaching Romanian as a foreign language should be viewed as a

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social process that both facilitates integration and perpetuates current disparities in the academic community.

1. Introduction

Over time, universities have become increasingly marked by linguistic and cultural diversity. Due to the academic mobility of international students, both administrative and pedagogical challenges and complex social dynamics come to the fore, where language elements play a crucial role. Teaching Romanian as a foreign language to international students is a didactic endeavour and a social process through which, in one form or another, the belonging and recognition of international students within the Romanian university environment is negotiated.

From a sociological point of view, linguistic elements can be understood and interpreted as a form of absolutely legitimate cultural capital, the acquisition of which can condition social and academic integration. This paper is largely inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's theories and reasoning on cultural capital and symbolic power. Throughout the paper, we analyse how the linguistic skills of international students can influence their academic and social progress. In addition, the paper aims to highlight the power relations involved in the pedagogical process, the symbolism of language elements and how these elements can determine the social integration or marginalisation of international students.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Cultural Capital and Symbolic Power

When discussing language learning from a sociological perspective, whether we are talking about the mother tongue or a foreign language, certain theoretical aspects such as cultural capital and symbolic power must be considered. In this case, Pierre Bourdieu succeeds in providing a suitable conceptualisation of cultural capital and symbolic power in the given context.

Firstly, cultural capital is defined by Pierre Bourdieu as a concept that refers to "the symbols, ideas, tastes and preferences that can be used strategically as resources in social action" (Marshall & Scott, 2014, p. 79). Therefore, cultural capital manages to encompass several elements, being a complex sociological concept. Accumulated cultural capital has the property of becoming a resource that can be constantly

improved, converted and, last but not least, invested in other social actions and interactions.However, cultural capital is not only that. When we talk about cultural capital, we are actually talking about a part of social habitus, that is, "a social tendency or disposition to act, think or feel in a certain way." (Atkinson, 2015, p. 78).

Secondly, the habitus discussed earlier "is created through the interaction between the individual self, group culture and social institutions represented by school and family" (Marshall & Scott, 2014, p. 80). In other words, habitus, implicitly, and cultural capital are dynamic, created through the interaction between the self and society. Thus, what we call in sociology "the rewriting of the self" often occurs. In the case of learning Romanian as a foreign language for students coming from abroad, learning Romanian can often make the difference between social integration and exclusion. According to Pierre Bourdieu, language itself is not just an insignificant means of communication but a perfectly legitimate form of cultural capital. Acquiring this type of cultural capital, as well as its subsequent improvement, can lead to the production of a socially recognised symbolic value. In this case, acquiring language skills can undoubtedly provide access to symbolic resources, academic recognition and a favourable position in the educational sphere and beyond.

Broadly speaking, it should be emphasised that for international students, a good command of the Romanian language is not just a functional requirement, but rather an essential condition for creating an environment conducive to the accumulation of institutionalised cultural capital, which consists of assessments, diplomas and, ultimately, academic validation. According to Bourdieu, "Linguistic competence is not a simple technical ability, but a symbolic capital that acquires its value only in a specific linguistic market" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 37). Thus, we end up referring to learning Romanian as an implicit criterion for differentiating between students who conform to linguistic norms and those who encounter difficulties in internalising them. Therefore, teaching Romanian as a foreign language to international students must be understood as a broad social process through which cultural capital and its elements are transmitted, evaluated and legitimised. Ultimately, it has a direct impact on the symbolic social integration or exclusion of international students in the university environment.

When it comes to symbolic power, Pierre Bourdieu has a pragmatic view, explaining on several occasions that symbolic power is the ability to impose meanings and norms for the purpose of legitimisation without any obvious or direct coercion. In

this case, educational institutions, more specifically universities, play a central role. Universities are not limited to imparting knowledge, but actively contribute to defining "correct", "academic" or "appropriate" language, setting standards that become official criteria for evaluating and classifying students. Therefore, universities play a crucial role in conferring symbolic authority on the Romanian language, so that international students who have a better command of linguistic norms are perceived by both their peers and teachers as being better integrated. At the opposite end of the spectrum, international students who do not master the Romanian language may be perceived as maladjusted or poorly adjusted and may be disadvantaged. The disadvantages do not stem from a lack of general knowledge but from a clear distance from linguistic norms.

Therefore, we can conclude that the symbolic power exercised by universities as educational institutions is not neutral. This symbolic power clearly and unequivocally contributes to the reproduction of social and cultural hierarchies, with language functioning as a criterion for differentiation and classification. However, this component of language skills does not only influence academic performance, but also the way students are perceived and treated by teachers, colleagues and other people outside the academic environment. In other words, good symbolic use of the Romanian language can bring greater symbolic legitimacy to international students, facilitating social integration and minimising or even totally eliminating forms of social exclusion.

2.2. Language and Social Inequalities in Education

Education is perceived as a mechanism that aims to promote and achieve equal opportunities. However, from a sociological point of view, education has functioned since ancient times as a space where existing social inequalities are reproduced. Educational institutions, implicitly including universities, value certain forms of cultural capital that may be more or less accessible depending on the social background of the students. Therefore, schools, regardless of the level we are referring to, not only transmit knowledge, but also legitimise pre-existing differences. Throughout this process, language plays a key role, with linguistic skills directly influencing access to academic resources. In other words, students who master the language of instruction in a form as close as possible to the academic norm can benefit from a significant advantage in their educational journey. At the same time, language skills can facilitate or limit social relationships in the university

environment and beyond, ultimately influencing even integration into the community.

3. Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language in the University Environment

3.1. Romanian as a Tool for Communication and Integration

Teaching Romanian as a foreign language in the university environment is a very serious and necessary matter. The functions of knowing Romanian in academic life are diverse, with knowledge of the language primarily helping students to fulfil a set of essential functions. Romanian is used throughout university years in lectures, seminars, exams and, naturally, in everyday interactions between students and teaching staff. Beyond strictly educational functions, knowledge of the Romanian language plays an important, if not key, role in informal communication, actively contributing to the building of social relationships. Simply put, the linguistic component can influence both the academic performance and the degree of social integration of international students.

It is imperative to understand the importance of the linguistic component for the active participation of international students in university life. The linguistic component is a fundamental condition for the active participation of students in university life in its entirety. In a broad sense, the ability to use and understand Romanian adequately allows international students to participate in academic discussions and interact effectively with teachers and colleagues. Without adequate language skills, students often adopt passive positions in classes or discussions. As a result, some international students end up limiting themselves to minimal interactions, which can affect both their learning process and their academic visibility. Therefore, language skills become a determining factor in the participation and recognition of international students' abilities in university communities.

Language is a central element in the social and academic integration of international students. Adapting to academic requirements and building interpersonal relationships, even belonging to groups, is facilitated by a good knowledge of the Romanian language. Thus, through language, international students can actively participate in academic and non-academic activities, reducing the possibility of social exclusion or isolation. In other words, by acquiring a considerable amount of

knowledge in terms of language skills, international students can use language to assert themselves academically and socially with greater ease.

3.2. Romanian as a Form of Legitimate Cultural Capital

In the Romanian academic environment, language skills constitute legitimate cultural capital. In other words, Romanian language skills are recognised and valued institutionally, being considered an essential condition for the academic success of international students. Institutional recognition of language skills is evident, primarily in the official requirements for language proficiency at a certain level for enrolment and participation in courses. Thus, the Romanian language and knowledge of it easily acquires the status of legitimate cultural capital, the possession of which confers access to resources and institutional recognition. In other words, students who meet the language criterion are perceived as being adaptable and subsequently adapted to the university environment in Romania.

Students' language skills can be assessed and certified in accordance with the rules in force, and these potential certifications represent a concrete form of institutionalisation of linguistic capital. Assessments and certifications succeed in transforming linguistic competence into a formal criterion for academic assessment, with language tests functioning as classification tool that can influence the student's academic status. There is certainly a difference between students who already have linguistic capital and those who do not.

The differences in status between international students are highlighted by unequal access to courses or circumstances that help them acquire linguistic capital. Students who have had prior exposure to the Romanian language or a similar educational context have a significant advantage and are more likely to adapt academically and socially. On the other hand, those who do not possess the necessary language skills are likely to be at greater risk of marginalisation and underestimation. Thus, the Romanian language also serves as a mechanism of differentiation, contributing to the reproduction of inequality in higher education.

4. Power Relations in the Pedagogical Process

4.1. The Asymmetrical Relationship between International Teachers and Students

Teachers hold symbolic authority within the academic environment, which is why the student-teacher relationship must be taken into account. According to Bourdieu and Passeron, "The educational system fulfils the function of consecrating and legitimising the dominant cultural arbitrariness, presenting it as neutral and universal" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 174). Therefore, the teacher, as a representative of the institution and the educational system, actively participates in legitimising the dominant norms, thus becoming an agent of symbolic reproduction. In the case of teaching Romanian as a foreign language to international students, the teacher becomes a vector of linguistic standards, contributing to the consolidation of a symbolic order. This symbolic order favours the positioning of the teacher as a social agent of the institution and the emergence of conformity to the norms of the academic environment.

Ultimately, it can be said that the power relationship in the pedagogical process gives the teacher an authority specific to their role. However, the authority held by the teacher is not strictly formal, but rather manifests itself in the form of symbolic power, with the teacher deciding what is valued and what is sanctioned from an academic point of view. According to Bourdieu, "Symbolic power is that invisible power that can only be exercised with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164). In other words, this type of authority takes the form of legitimate and natural authority, thus becoming a rarely contested issue.

In this case, international students find themselves in a structurally vulnerable position in relation to the teacher and the institution. A lack of the necessary language skills can lead to an increased feeling of insecurity and dependence. This type of vulnerability can lead to an accidental limitation of the student's active participation in the educational process. A lack of the necessary language skills can have significant consequences on the academic progress of international students, such as reduced or even lost motivation, delayed completion of studies, or even academic dropout. In addition, Bourdieu draws attention to the fact that academic failure can be internalised and labelled as personal failure: "Academic failure tends to be internalised as personal failure, even when it is the result of structural inequalities"

(Bourdieu, 1998, p. 130). In the case of international students, such internalisation can lead to demotivation, withdrawal, academic marginalisation and social isolation.

5. Processes of Integration, Marginalisation and Symbolic Exclusion

For international students, the integration process can be easy and smooth or more difficult, depending on various internal and external factors. In the case of international students, one of the main factors that can lead to successful social integration or, conversely, to marginalisation and symbolic exclusion is language proficiency.

When a prospective student chooses to study in a country other than their country of origin, there are various stages in the process of integration into both academic life and the new social environment and culture to which they will be exposed. Often, knowledge of the local language acts as a criterion for acceptance and integration. Although universities generally promote the discourse of inclusion, full participation in academic and social life is only possible for those who have mastered the legitimate language. Bourdieu offers a brief theorisation of integration in this regard, stating that "Integration into a field presupposes the possession of the capital specific to that field" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 20). In Bourdieu's terms, access to the university field is directly mediated by the possession of the appropriate cultural capital. Therefore, the social integration of international students is influenced and even conditioned by their level of linguistic competence.

When the social integration of international students becomes a difficult and cumbersome process, they end up fighting passively or actively against social stigmatisation and then resort to self-censorship and social withdrawal. In general, linguistic difficulties and the barriers that arise from these difficulties slowly but surely lead to a process of stigmatisation. Sometimes, mistakes in expression, lack of fluency and accent can provoke negative reactions that can lead to unfavourable labelling, which can affect students' self-esteem. This leads to self-censorship and avoidance of oral interventions even in the university environment, hindering the learning process.

6. The Role of Academic Institutions

Academic institutions play a crucial role in facilitating the integration process into the academic environment for international students. This is because academic

institutions need to clearly formulate a set of explicit and implicit expectations for international students and others. Providing a set of expectations helps international students adapt and conform more quickly to academic and linguistic norms. However, the context makes the responsibility of adapting to the new environment largely a matter for the individual rather than for educational institutions. According to Bourdieu, regardless of the context, "Institutions tend to transform social conditions of possibility into individual requirements." (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 80).

Despite this, it is important to emphasise that there are institutional obligations and responsibilities regarding the integration of international students and the support of cultural diversity. Creating inclusive pedagogical contexts supports cultural diversity and can increase the chances of social integration for international students. Such contexts also greatly help to reduce the symbolic inequalities that international students inevitably face. Such a reflexive approach can inevitably lead to a form of symbolic recognition of linguistic and cultural differences, ultimately transforming them into valuable resources.

However, creating overly standardised pedagogical contexts for teaching Romanian as a foreign language can easily become a rigid matter that risks ignoring the specific needs of students. From a sociological perspective, "Pedagogical standardisation tends to favour those who already possess legitimate cultural capital" (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1977, p. 72). In other words, standardisation, especially when excessive and rigid, inevitably leads to the consolidation of social inequalities and hinders the integration process.

7. Pedagogical Implications and Inclusive Perspectives

Finally, before concluding, I believe that pedagogical involvement should also be discussed. I believe that, at present, there is a greater need than ever to understand and apply inclusive and reflective teaching methods, given that more and more young people are choosing to study in foreign countries. An inclusive pedagogical perspective implies, for example, that the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of international students should be recognised as educational resources rather than obstacles. As a result, universities can become a place of intercultural dialogue, where cultural differences are integrated into the development process and contribute to the collective academic experience. Universities and teachers alike can also see that "recognition of cultural differences is a condition of educational effectiveness" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 77).

For effective collaboration with international students, it is not sufficient to discuss the university itself. Teaching staff must be trained in intercultural sensitivity and inclusive teaching practices. Teachers assigned to teach Romanian as a foreign language must possess both the concrete ability to teach this language and the psycho-sociological skills to fully understand the experiences and difficulties that international students may encounter. With these skills, teachers are able to actively contribute to reducing asymmetries and creating an open and balanced educational climate.

8. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to analyse the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language in the university environment from a sociological perspective, highlighting the role of language as a tool for integration, but also as a mechanism for reproducing symbolic inequalities. The synthesis of the main theoretical results shows that teaching Romanian cannot be understood exclusively as a didactic process, but as a complex social process, situated at the intersection between education, power and social recognition. Starting from the theory of cultural capital and symbolic power, the paper highlighted how linguistic competence functions as a form of legitimate cultural capital, influencing international students' access to academic resources, social relations and institutional recognition. In the absence of this capital, linguistic difficulties can lead to social isolation and reduced participation in academic life, accentuating differences in status and access to social capital.

In conclusion, the contribution of this paper lies in integrating sociological concepts into the analysis of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, offering a critical perspective relevant to both the sociology of education and foreign language teaching. By highlighting the tension between integration and the reproduction of inequalities, the paper emphasises the need for reflective and inclusive pedagogical practices capable of transforming linguistic and cultural diversity into a valuable educational and social resource.

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