



ORIGINAL PAPER

Objective Strategies and Strategic Objectives in Teaching Romanian to Foreign Students

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Abstract:

Teaching Romanian to foreign students at the Preparatory Year at the University of Craiova is vital for both personal and academic growth. It fosters cultural exchange and mutual understanding, enhances academic success, promotes inclusivity and diversity, and contributes to the growth of the Romanian economy. By offering language courses and cultural experiences, the University of Craiova showcases the benefits of studying in Romania, and highlights its academic and cultural strengths. This not only attracts more students to the university, but also contributes to the growth of the Romanian economy, as international students bring in revenue and stimulate local businesses. Furthermore, by interacting with international students, locals can broaden their horizons and gain new perspectives, further promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding. The Romanian language is an essential tool for communication and diplomacy, and learning it is an investment in one's future. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to speak multiple languages and understand different cultures is more important than ever. By learning Romanian, foreign students at the University of Craiova can gain a unique perspective on the world, and develop skills and knowledge that will serve them well in their personal and professional lives.

Keywords: *teaching, Romanian, culture, language, perspective.*

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Introduction

Language is the backbone of any culture, and the Romanian language is no exception. As an official language of the European Union, it is spoken by over 24 million people worldwide, and is an essential tool for communication, trade, and diplomacy. Consequently, the role of teaching Romanian to foreign students during the Preparatory Year at the University of Craiova is not merely academic; it's a form of cultural diplomacy. This is particularly important because, "education is one of the most important factors that define a society. It represents the starting engine for all the activities that run within each society" (Stoian, 2019:126). The fusion of language instruction with this broader societal purpose elevates the Preparatory Year beyond the confines of a mere educational program. Embracing this philosophy, the University of Craiova leverages modern approaches to education. In this evolving landscape, "education is no longer dependent on chalk and blackboard; it is interactive, lifelong learning, visual, kinetic, and, above all, aware and responsive to students' needs, bringing forth the compulsory skills in order to have a smooth conversion towards the workforce." (Bărbuceanu, 2020:144)

The concept of the classroom as a microcosm for society has long been accepted in educational theory. In the context of the University of Craiova's Preparatory Year for foreign students, this idea takes on even greater significance as the classroom becomes not just a place for imparting language skills but a vibrant arena for multicultural dialogue and a melting pot of perspectives. This aspect of the educational experience adds several layers of depth to the process of learning Romanian.

The Preparatory Year is specifically aimed at foreign students, with a robust curriculum that combines linguistic training with cultural experiences, this approach playing a pivotal role in personal development, academic success, and even economic growth. The two concepts - objective strategies and strategic objectives - provide an interlinked framework that guides the education process. While objective strategies refer to the concrete methods or approaches taken to achieve specific educational outcomes, strategic objectives refer to the long-term goals the program aims to accomplish, both on the academic front and broader scopes. By aligning effective teaching strategies with broader institutional and societal objectives, the program manages to create a holistic educational experience that benefits not just the students but the community and country at large. Let's delve into the strategies employed and the objectives achieved in this intricate interplay of education and culture.

Fostering Cultural Exchange and Mutual Understanding

One of the foundational objectives of the Preparatory Year at the University of Craiova and most potent benefits of teaching Romanian to foreign students is to promote a two-way street of cultural exchange and mutual understanding, thus transcending traditional language instruction by weaving into the very fabric of education the goals of societal integration, cross-cultural learning, and global citizenry. In this regard, as teachers of a foreign language, the information we provide "cannot and must not be restricted to traditional structures of grammar, vocabulary and so on. We need to stay connected to an entire apparatus of updated cultural and informational references." (Lăpădat and Lăpădat, 2020:139)

The Preparatory Year at the University of Craiova goes beyond simple language instruction; it offers a well-rounded curriculum and advanced courses tailored to students' academic needs that involve cultural studies, history, and even local traditions.

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Students learn not only the grammar and vocabulary but also the "language" of Romanian life—its customs, its folklore, its food, and its people. The idea is to make learning Romanian a pathway to understanding Romania itself. The curriculum is designed to progress from basic to complex concepts, ensuring a comprehensive learning experience. Evidently, as students become more proficient in Romanian, they “become more likely to cope with the challenges posed by acting and reacting in a foreign language in daily life contexts but also in highly specialized situations that are likely to occur in their future professions.” (Boncea, 2021:125)

This program is designed with a student-centric approach, where the “teacher/trainer tries to tailor the course so that it covers as much from the learners' expectations” (Marcu, 2020:120). This sentiment underscores the importance of a responsive educational approach, adapting not just to academic requirements but also to the diverse cultural, social, and professional aspirations that students bring into the classroom. The goal is to bridge the gap between a standard curriculum and the individualized needs of each student, making the learning journey more relevant and enriching for everyone involved. Moreover, in line with this adaptability, “education and the instructional means are also part of this ever-changing process, many institutions and stakeholders taking an interest in how to better [...] improve the educational process” (Marcu, 2021:44). Therefore, the program’s flexibility isn’t just an isolated effort by the teacher, but part of a broader, evolving dialogue about enhancing educational quality that involves a wide range of institutions and interested parties.

The classroom serves as a microcosm for broader societal interactions. When foreign students enrol in the Preparatory Year, they come from different countries bringing unique perspectives and cultural backgrounds into the room. Each brings a unique set of experiences, viewpoints, and questions to the classroom. Faculty encourage discussions that allow these different viewpoints to interact and enrich the class. Learning Romanian in such a multicultural environment adds layers of depth to the process.

A typical language lesson may begin with the introduction of new Romanian vocabulary or grammatical rules. However, in a multicultural classroom, these lessons can naturally evolve into more complex discussions. For example, when exploring words that have Latin roots in the Romanian language, students might delve into discussions about the Roman Empire and its influence on European languages. Similarly, learning about the Slavic elements in Romanian could lead to broader conversations about Slavic migrations and their impact on Eastern Europe. When a student from India learns the Romanian word for "family," it may provoke a discussion on family structures in different societies. When a student from the United States learns about Romanian holidays, it might lead to a comparative conversation about national celebrations and their origins. Consequently, these examples of diversity turn every language lesson into an opportunity for cultural exchange. Language doesn’t exist in a vacuum; it’s part of the ongoing, ever-changing dialogue between cultures. Learning Romanian in a multicultural setting allows students to bring in current events and geopolitical realities into the conversation. If the lesson touches upon words related to governance or politics, for instance, it might spark discussions about Romania's role in the European Union, its foreign policy, or even broader geopolitical concerns affecting Europe.

Supplementing classroom instruction are extracurricular activities that engage students with the local community. Field trips to historical sites, participation in local

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festivals, and volunteering opportunities are organized to offer an immersive experience. These activities function as real-world language labs where students can practice Romanian while learning about the culture in an experiential way.

Cultural exchange is not a one-way street. Local students and community members also gain from interacting with foreign students. Exposure to different cultures widens their world view and challenges them to question their own assumptions and stereotypes. This reciprocal benefit strengthens the fabric of the community, making it more inclusive and diverse.

Success in fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding can be challenging to quantify. However, qualitative measures such as student and community surveys, interviews, and even tracking long-term engagement between international students and local communities can offer valuable insights. Metrics can include everything from academic performance and language proficiency to the quality of intercultural relationships developed and the depth of cultural understanding achieved.

Fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding is not merely an adjunct to teaching Romanian at the University of Craiova; it is a strategic objective that amplifies the benefits of the educational experience. By integrating cultural elements into language learning, the Preparatory Year program enables foreign students to engage more deeply with Romanian society, while also enriching the local community. It serves as a powerful testament to the myriad possibilities when education is approached as a tool for holistic personal and societal development.

Enhancing Academic Success

Many universities in Romania offer courses in Romanian, and proficiency in the language is often a prerequisite for admission. The University of Craiova, for instance, requires international students to have a good command of Romanian to be admitted to most of its faculties. By learning Romanian at the Preparatory Year, foreign students can meet this requirement and pursue their academic goals in Romania.

Linguistic proficiency is often closely tied to academic success and understanding the nuances of the Romanian language can provide foreign students with an advantage in their subsequent academic pursuits. The curriculum includes not only basic language courses but also specialized vocabulary and terminology that are field-specific. This dual focus ensures that students are not just linguistically prepared but also academically fortified to face their future educational challenges in Romania.

In academia, language is the primary medium through which knowledge is conveyed, debated, and constructed. The ability to understand lectures, read textbooks, engage in discussions, and write assignments is central to academic success. As noted by educational researcher Scorțan, “conversations support students in their zone of proximal development and engage them in a higher level of reasoning and problem solving than when they are alone” (Scorțan, 2022:153). Students who lack proficiency in Romanian are at a distinct disadvantage in this environment, facing barriers that can hinder their academic performance and integration into the scholarly community.

The Preparatory Year incorporates several strategies to help students overcome these language barriers. These include intensive language courses tailored to different levels of proficiency, supplementary materials, and even academic support services like tutoring. Some courses may offer parallel instruction in English and Romanian, making it easier for students to bridge the language gap while they're still learning. On the one hand, for students with little or no prior knowledge of Romanian, beginner-level courses

focus on basic vocabulary, common phrases, and introductory grammar, the aim being to help students reach a point where they can engage in simple conversations and understand basic written texts. On the other hand, for those with some background in Romanian or other Romance languages, intermediate and advanced courses are available. These courses delve into more complex grammatical structures, idiomatic expressions, and specialized vocabulary needed for academic studies. In the educational journey of teaching Romanian to foreign students, the objective is not merely linguistic; it aims to integrate them into the very fabric of Romanian society. And language, being a "concrete manifestation of a powerful and diverse society," (Chirițescu and Păunescu, 2021:94) serves as both the medium and the message in this uplifting learning experience. This idea also aligns seamlessly with the broader philosophy that "Modern language education aims at the formation of a multicultural identity" (Chirițescu and Păunescu, 2017:381), thus, achieving once again a dual purpose: to equip students with linguistic skills and to nurture a diverse and inclusive identity within them.

The classroom instruction is augmented with supplementary materials designed to reinforce and extend learning. These could include: online platforms with exercises and quizzes, supplementary readings that provide cultural context, multimedia materials like podcasts or videos in Romanian, mobile apps focused on Romanian language acquisition. The idea is to create a 360-degree learning environment that extends beyond the classroom, providing students with the resources they need to practice and improve continually.

Another innovative strategy employed is offering some courses with parallel instruction in English and Romanian. This method serves as a bridge, easing the transition for students who may be proficient in English but are still acquiring Romanian language skills. For instance, a lecture on Romanian history might be delivered with slides in both languages, allowing students to associate new Romanian vocabulary with familiar English terms. This dual-language approach not only enhances comprehension but also accelerates the language acquisition process.

It goes without saying that students who gain a strong grasp of Romanian are better able to comprehend lectures, leading to more meaningful classroom participation. They can ask nuanced questions and engage in debates, thereby deepening their understanding of course materials. Language proficiency is also crucial for written assignments, a significant aspect of academic evaluation. A strong command of Romanian enables students to articulate their ideas more clearly, providing them with the means to excel in written exams and papers.

Academic success is not just about grades; it's also about becoming part of an intellectual community. Proficiency in Romanian allows foreign students to network more effectively with professors, peers, and even industry professionals, opening doors to research opportunities, internships, and future career prospects. Many academic resources, such as research papers, textbooks, and scholarly articles, may be available exclusively in Romanian. Language proficiency thus broadens the scope of resources accessible to students, enriching their academic experience. The benefits of language proficiency extend beyond the Preparatory Year. As students progress through their academic journey, they will find that the language skills they acquired during this foundational year continue to serve them well on a long-term basis, both in undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, given "the challenges related to the evolution of knowledge, the growing heterogeneity of students, the pressing needs to

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train a qualified workforce, and the rise of technologies, there is an exigent need for constant adaptations of educational practices in order to guarantee their quality” (Scorțan, 2021:41). In this light, the University of Craiova and similar higher education institutions have the imperative to not just teach language but also to create a learning ecosystem that is responsive to these broader educational and societal shifts. This involves rethinking language education as a tool that prepares students for a diverse set of challenges—academic, social, and professional.

Language, at its core, is a vehicle for communicating ideas. When foreign students first begin learning Romanian, there is an inherent struggle to convert thoughts into a new linguistic form, grappling with unfamiliar grammar structures, vocabulary, and cultural nuances. This struggle is not just about acquiring a new skill set; it's a full-fledged metamorphosis in how one perceives and interacts with the world. Basically, the experience of learning Romanian for foreign students is indeed a "transition, a metamorphosis of the struggle to communicate ideas." (Lăpădat, 2022:14). With effective teaching strategies and supportive classroom environments, as students progress in their Romanian language studies, their struggle starts to transition. This transformative process is not limited to just linguistic proficiency; it extends to a broader understanding and appreciation of Romanian culture, history, and social norms, thus, enriching not just the students but also the cultural and intellectual tapestry of the Romanian academic and social landscape.

Global Competence: A Pivotal Strategic Objective in Teaching Romanian to Foreign Students

In an era of increasing globalization and interconnectedness, the concept of global competence has become more important than ever. While learning a new language is intrinsically valuable, the broader goal of language education programs like the Preparatory Year at the University of Craiova is to prepare students to operate effectively and ethically in a global context. In teaching Romanian to foreign students, one of the key strategic objectives is to equip students with the skills and mindsets to become global citizens. Global competence refers to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand and act creatively and responsibly in a complex, interconnected world. It encompasses not only the ability to comprehend and appreciate different cultures and viewpoints but also the ability to translate that understanding into actions that make a positive impact. In an attempt to vividly render the complexity and inevitability of intercultural communication in a globalized world, researcher Burtea-Cioroianu states that: “Globalization has made intercultural communication an inevitable fact. Today's world is subject to rapid changes, the interaction between people takes on new dimensions. Contact and communication with other cultures are the dominant characteristics of modern life. Intercultural communication involves much more than understanding the norms of a group; it involves accepting and tolerating the differences between foreign students who have come to learn the Romanian language, not only at the level of language and traditions, but also of the approach to certain behaviours specific to certain life situations, certain contexts—economic and political—seen through the eyes of national identity.” (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2022:136-137)

It can be said that learning Romanian serves as a bridge to understanding not just a single country but the broader European and global context. Students become proficient in a language that is part of the Latin family of languages, thereby giving them a strategic vantage point for understanding other languages like Italian, French, and

Spanish. Furthermore, language is deeply intertwined with culture. By learning Romanian, students are also exposed to the country's history, traditions, and social norms. This dual focus on language and culture broadens students' horizons and enables them to approach other cultures with a more nuanced perspective.

Achieving global competence involves more than just mastering a set of skills or accumulating knowledge; it requires an empathetic understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures and social norms: "The necessity of the socio-cultural integration of the foreign students originating from sometimes entirely different linguistic, cultural and religious environments becomes essential" (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2020:141). In the same vein, this integration turns out to be 'essential' as it contributes to forming well-rounded individuals who can interact effectively and ethically in a globalized world.

In essence, a strong grasp of Romanian equips students to become intermediaries between cultures. This skill is vital in diplomatic roles, international business, or any profession requiring negotiation and consensus-building among diverse groups. Global competence is increasingly seen as a valuable asset in various professional fields. Having proficiency in a less commonly taught language like Romanian can provide a unique selling point in the job market. Being globally competent allows students to interact effectively with people from various backgrounds, which can be especially beneficial in international careers. Their time studying in Romania can facilitate long-lasting professional and personal connections that span continents. Global competence also involves the ethical dimension of being a global citizen, and an awareness of the cultural and social norms of a different country enables students to act responsibly and ethically in a global context, whether that involves international trade, human rights, or environmental sustainability.

Direct and Long-Term Economic Impact of International Students

While the primary focus of educational institutions is often considered to be the intellectual and personal growth of students, the economic implications of a well-crafted educational program cannot be overlooked.

International students often pay a premium on tuition fees compared to local students. This additional revenue can have a transformative impact on educational institutions, providing them with the financial means to upgrade facilities, hire more qualified faculty, and invest in research and development initiatives. Tuition fees collected from international students don't just line the coffers of educational institutions; they have a broader economic impact. A portion of these fees often goes toward taxation, which directly contributes to the government's budget. The revenue generated through taxation can be invested in public services and infrastructural projects, thereby benefiting society at large. The substantial revenue from international students' tuition fees can also encourage universities to expand, invest in local partnerships, or sponsor events and activities. This has a ripple effect on local businesses and can even attract foreign direct investment, further stimulating the economy.

In addition to tuition, foreign students need to secure housing, use public transportation, and eat—just like anyone else. The cumulative impact of these daily activities is not insignificant. When hundreds or even thousands of foreign students engage in these activities, the financial input to local businesses can be substantial.

The demand generated by international students' daily needs can lead to job creation in the local economy. Whether it's additional personnel in local grocery stores,

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new jobs in the transport sector, or more staff in rental accommodation services, the net economic impact is increased employment opportunities for local residents.

International students often serve as unofficial ambassadors of the place where they study. As they share their experiences with family and friends back home, they generate interest in the local area. Family visits, especially during significant academic events like graduation, bring in additional tourists who spend money on hotels, dining, and entertainment. Thus, the influx of family and friends visiting international students adds another layer of cultural exchange and can serve as a form of soft power, which boosts the global image of the place, making it more attractive for future tourism, investment, and even for hosting international events or conferences: "Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values, and policies." (Nye, 2008:94). At its core, the teaching of language can be seen as a form of soft power, a way to attract and integrate individuals into a culture, belief system, or community through the allure of understanding and communication, rather than through coercion or material incentives. This phenomenon can have an even longer impact, because sometimes, the family and friends who visit become enamoured with the location and choose to return for holidays or even for investment opportunities, further contributing to the economic and cultural vibrancy of the place, and creating lasting bonds that serve both Romania's national interests and the broader goals of international understanding and cooperation.

The economic contributions of international students have a multiplier effect on local and national economies. This occurs when the initial spending by students leads to additional spending and economic activity. John Maynard Keynes succinctly summarizes the notion that an initial investment or action triggers a cycle of increased economic activity: "The multiplier effect comes into operation when an initial increase in total demand leads to increased incomes and therefore further rounds of increased spending and so on" (Keynes, 2018:103). While the author introduced this concept to discuss macroeconomic theory, its application has broadened to include various fields like education, healthcare, and even language programs. For example, an initial investment in language and cultural programs for foreign students can yield economic benefits that extend beyond the confines of the academic institution. Students pay tuition fees and living expenses, which directly contributes to the economy. A surge in demand for student housing could lead to increased construction activity, which in turn creates jobs and boosts related sectors like real estate and retail. Moreover, when students spend money in local shops, whether for groceries, clothes, or entertainment, these businesses experience increased revenue. This could lead them to hire more staff, expand their premises, or even open new branches. While the initial spending may seem self-contained, its impact stimulates and reverberates through various sectors, thereby creating a cycle of economic activity, a multiplier effect that benefits not just the educational institution but the community, region, and even the nation at large.

The strategic objective of contributing to economic growth through the teaching of Romanian to foreign students at the University of Craiova is multi-faceted as it incorporates immediate benefits as well as longer-term impacts, and the resulting economic vitality not only serves as a testament to the program's success, far transcending the confines of a traditional language course to touch various spheres of society, it also demonstrates that effective education not only shapes individuals but also has the power to reshape economies.

Conclusion

The strategic teaching of Romanian to foreign students at the University of Craiova is a multi-faceted endeavour that yields benefits on multiple fronts. From enhancing cultural understanding and academic success to promoting economic growth and global communication, the impact is far-reaching. It's not just the institution that recognizes these benefits; “the students themselves reflect a high level of gratification, self-efficacy, and they feel reinforced in their learning process” (Bărbuceanu,2020:44). This real-world positive feedback underscores the efficacy of the program and serves as a model that other universities and institutions can follow, leveraging language education as a tool for broader personal, societal, cultural, and even economic gains.

The multi-pronged approach taken by the University of Craiova's Preparatory Year program demonstrates a deep understanding of the challenges foreign students face due to language barriers. As aptly stated, “the challenges are numerous and complex, but it is the teaching approach that can make a significant difference” (Boncea, 2018:37), bringing out the importance of the pedagogical methodology in navigating the myriad challenges that foreign students often confront. Whether it's the psychological burden of adapting to a new language or the intricate nuances that come with understanding a new culture, a well-calibrated teaching approach has the power to transform these challenges into opportunities for enriched learning. These strategies are not just about teaching a language; their aim being “to turn skilful pupils into skilful users” (Stoian, 2022:47), and ultimately equipping students with the tools they need to thrive in a new academic and cultural environment.

The classroom interactions during the Preparatory Year at the University of Craiova offer a case study in how language learning can be enriched by a multicultural environment. By fostering a setting where students are encouraged to connect linguistic lessons to broader cultural and historical contexts, the program does more than teach Romanian; it actually offers students a nuanced understanding of the world in which Romanian is spoken, turning language learning into an exercise in building global citizens.

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