



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# The Cultural Dimension in Teaching and Learning the Romanian Language as a Foreign Language

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### Abstract:

Foreign students' notions of the Romanian language can be enriched not only by exposure to the language but also by familiarizing them with important aspects of the local culture and civilization. Through workshops, excursions, visits to museums and cultural evenings, foreign students have the chance to familiarize themselves with Romanian customs and traditions and to learn the Romanian language. In this context, it is necessary to design some modern methods and tools for learning the Romanian language by foreign students, articulated with the cultural dimension and, at the same time, centered, not on the history of literature, nor on grammar, but on the practical dimension. From an intercultural perspective in the teaching and learning of the Romanian language as a foreign language, the importance of knowledge about the culture of the target language becomes a sine qua non condition in the context in which the acquisition of language and cultural knowledge are closely related. Romanian culture and civilization courses contribute significantly to the preservation and promotion of the Romanian language and Romanian culture, as well as shaping the image of a modern and dynamic Romania among foreign students.

**Keywords:** *culture, civilization, dimension, diversity, Romanian language.*

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# **The Cultural Dimension in Teaching and Learning the Romanian Language as a Foreign Language**

## **Introduction**

Cultural diversity is a reality among foreign students in courses teaching Romanian as a foreign language. The intercultural paradigm appears at this level of learning and as a necessary interweaving of studies with the social system. Thus, at the educational level, the effectiveness of making intercultural contacts between foreign students is beneficial for learning the Romanian language and for creating a good environment of understanding and coexistence.

Foreign students, once they arrive in Romania and integrate into a Romanian language learning group, live in a multicultural environment, having different cultures of origin. A good way to access the culture of the Romanian language, but also other cultures, is through the courses of learning the Romanian language as a foreign language. Romanian language courses as a foreign language are, of course, a very good way to better understand culture and multiculturalism in general. However, these courses currently tend to focus more on simply learning the Romanian language in some university centers and less on teaching cultural aspects, which could lead to the creation of a better multicultural environment.

Foreign students' awareness of other cultures and understanding of cultures, traditions and history could increase with their teaching in Romanian as a foreign language courses. So, within these courses, we need to communicate better, to make known the culture and tradition of our country, but also to learn about the traditions, culture and history of others. Students' motivation and interest are the basis of study, especially for learning foreign languages. If the students do not have the opportunity to be in contact with the foreign language in a real situation, in our case with the Romanian language, we can hardly arouse their interest for a continuous work in language assimilation, which means that arousing the students' interest in the language they a learner is extremely important in learning it and this can be achieved through culture courses.

From a terminological point of view, the term "culture" means, according to the Universal Encyclopedia Britannica: "Ensemble of knowledge, beliefs and human components that represent both the result and a component of the human capacity to study and transmit knowledge to future generations. Thus, culture consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, technologies, artworks, rituals, ceremonies and symbols. (...) Every human society has its own culture or socio-cultural system". (Enciclopedia Universală Britannica, 2010: 319). In the case of foreign students studying the Romanian language, cultural differences are sometimes visible, which makes it difficult to communicate and adapt to a language and culture totally different from the one they come from. Thus, individual attitudes, values, ideals and beliefs are largely influenced by the culture from which that person comes.

Teaching Romanian as a foreign language to foreign students cannot be done only linguistically, but also requires a cultural approach, so that in the end, the students who will stay in Romania integrate and assimilate much more easily from a social point of view. According Bloju, "Foreign language teaching is based on the assumption that we understand each other if we share the same code and use it appropriately. In teaching foreign languages we share the belief that one language can be translatable into another; the difficulties are met in the teaching of culture. When students learn other languages, they gain knowledge and better understand the culture that uses that language". (Bloju, C., L., 2022: 288)

### **Elements of language and culture in learning Romanian as a foreign language**

The cultural approach to teaching Romanian as a foreign language is one that, in addition to the traditional methods used (learning the grammatical structure, vocabulary, reading and listening), places foreign students in a real-life learning context, so that they understand more well from the beginning the real meanings of some words, fixing certain grammatical structures already taught in the course, the language used in certain contexts, etc. So, "Language is not just a simple communication tool that consists of the factual transmission of information, but a cultural treasure that encompasses the history and evolution of a people that has been gathered throughout its existence: behaviours, attitudes, values and mentalities, a whole existential philosophy. Thus, the history of a people, the social and fundamental norms of a society are essential factors in understanding the culture and civilization of that people. In this sense, it is recommended that those who learn a foreign language be aware that it involves the correct understanding and interpretation of the ethno-socio-cultural elements specific to the given language.

A new didactic approach is required in the teaching and learning of foreign languages, in which the teacher aims to use and combine in a natural, harmonious way cultural elements in the teaching process of all types of lessons, whether it is about an hour of grammar, translation, or vocabulary. The notions of culture and civilization should no longer be seen as something separate". (Lăpădat, L, Lăpădat, M-M, 2020: 143)

The teaching process of the Romanian language as a foreign language did not always include the cultural component but focused more on classical methods such as: the method that focuses on analyzing grammatical structures and on translations, the conversation method or teaching the spoken language, the situational method through which are encouraged exercises and the communicative teaching method, which takes into account not only the grammatical aspects, but also the other linguistic skills that an individual must acquire, namely listening, communication, writing, reading. But, "(...) considering that there is a close connection between language and culture, we could say that only by knowing other cultures does man become aware of his own culture and obviously of his own cultural identity". (Alexandru, F., 2010: 9)

This cultural approach to teaching Romanian as a foreign language implicitly implies, as a result of greater interaction between students, cultural exchanges, thus helping them to acquire not only communication skills, but also intercultural communication skills. Because, "knowing another cultural space has always started through the process of learning the languages used in that space, that is, a foreign language. The process of teaching and learning a foreign language, which can receive the intercultural attribute, has a double role: on the one hand, to maintain identity through awareness of the mother tongue and one's own culture, and on the other hand, to develop fields of action through the formation of intercultural communication competence". (Alexandru, F., 2010: 10)

After all, it is a challenge to teach the Romanian language to foreign students from all over the world, having a different socio-cultural background or even inherent adaptation problems to life in a foreign country with new traditions and customs for them. The cultural diversity of foreign students who wish to learn the Romanian language, however, requires some caution on the part of the professor when selecting, in

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the teaching process, the topics to be covered or the socio-cultural contexts he chooses to practice the language.

Foreign students who learn Romanian as a foreign language have a different cultural profile, which requires greater attention to the way in which cultural aspects are offered in the process of teaching Romanian, because they will understand and interpret each notion introduced through the prism of their profile cultural. Here are some examples of views offered by foreign students on their experience in Romania:

"The experience of being a student abroad is one that brings many challenges and satisfactions. I chose to study in Romania and the city of Craiova became my second home. Craiova is a city that combines tradition with modernity, offering an ideal environment for students. The city is known for its beautiful parks and numerous cultural events. Every day, I have the opportunity to participate in various local activities, which enriches my knowledge and experiences (...) I met students from various other countries having diverse and united communication. (...) Learning the Romanian language was a challenging process, which allowed me to interact more effectively with the locals and to better understand the Romanian culture and traditions".

(Petar Petrović – Serbia)

"(...) my experience in Romania is very wonderful because the Romanian people are very kind and sociable, and here I will learn new and wonderful cultures. It is true that life here would be more expensive than in Yemen, but it is worth it. You will also experience snow for the first time and see people playing in the snow. Finally, I liked it. It is a wonderful experience (...)".

(Thoodan Al Jaboobi - Yemen)

"(...) I came to Romania for 4 months and I learned a lot here. Now we live in Craiova and I am very comfortable here. Craiova is a small town and the people are very polite and friendly. (...) Their language is very beautiful and easy. (...) Last month I was in Bucharest, which is the capital of Romania, and I had a nice time, ate Arabic food and visited the Palace of the Parliament (...) I came to Romania exactly because I like this country more and I have a reason I want to do medicine and here is very suitable for me. (...) I also like Romanian culture and civilization and architecture. Romanians are famous for these".

(Bashar Shafer Al Bashtawi – Jordania)

"Student life in Craiova is very interesting. Craiova is a very beautiful city. (...) Life is always interesting in Craiova. The Romanian language is a little difficult, but the courses are easy (...)".

(Sara Filipović - Serbia)

"Romania is a good country for students. Here we have many faculties and universities in various fields and the study system is modern and very practical. There are many students from different countries".

(Zahra Rezai - Afganistan)

## **Cristina-Eugenia Burtea-Cioroianu**

"Faculty here has its pros and cons. The problem for me now is that I study in a foreign country, in another language, but in time it will be easier. Being a student in Romania is very interesting, new people, another city, a completely different experience".

(Dušan Čuberovič - Serbia)

"As a foreign student in Romania, I am grateful for the chance to study in Europe. I also interacted with an interesting language, Romanian, a combination of Latin and Slavic languages. Thanks to my knowledge of French, I can learn this language more easily. Language is not the only beautiful thing in Romania, the Romanian landscape amazes me. (...) I found a traditional Vietnamese restaurant in the city center and I liked it even though it is expensive. Romania may be far from home, but it offers days full of learning, exploration and newfound connections. In conclusion, I'm happy to be here."

(Lê Hoàng Anh Thăng- Vietnam)

"There are a lot of foreign students in Romania. They choose Romania because it has invested in the education system and the diplomas have potential. People are very nice and help you when you need. I am a foreign student from Albania and now I am finishing the preparatory year, the year in which foreign students have to learn the Romanian language. For me, the Romanian language was easy because the alphabet and more than 8000 words are almost the same as in the Albanian language".

(Dhimitra Ciko - Albania)

Beyond the diversity of language and culture of foreign students learning the Romanian language, there is a link that unites them all, namely the desire to study in a foreign country for them that will adopt them for a longer or shorter period of time. Because as we can see from their confessions, they look for common points with the country of origin, with that "home" (the joy of discovering a Vietnamese restaurant) that can help them adapt to a new language and culture more easily. So, volens nolens those who teach Romanian as a foreign language to foreign students must integrate cultural aspects in the process of teaching a foreign language considering the linguistic profile of the course participants, attitude, behavior and learning style. In this way, foreign students' intercultural communication skills are developed as well as their active participation in the course.

According Chirițescu and Păunescu "Academic teachers can get a better grasp of the educational and cultural realities of the students and begin building early on a collaboratively bond that can have positive consequences in the long run. The job shadowing element is a new tactic in the teaching arsenal and it is based on highly innovative and courageous, if not visionary practices. Teachers must seriously mention to the students that the Romanian literary language is one, but that its formation is based on centuries of history and linguistics, of movements of both peoples and languages, specific languages for each region". (Chirițescu, I. M., Păunescu, F. A., 2022: 228)

The transfer of knowledge of Romanian as a foreign language to foreign students can no longer be separated from the transfer of knowledge of Romanian culture and civilization. In the teaching of the Romanian language as a foreign language, for a better integration of foreign students in the Romanian cultural and linguistic space, the

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emphasis is placed on the elements of the history of the Romanian language, on the elements of popular culture and civilization, on ancient and modern Romanian art, on elements of written culture, and on scientific and technical creation, for example. The customs and rituals of the Romanian people specific to certain periods arouse a real interest among foreign students.

Thus, foreign students are exposed both video and verbally in Romanian culture and civilization classes about agrarian customs: "In the areas of southern Romania, the harvest is preceded by the custom called *Drăgaica*. *Drăgaica* is the name given to the most beautiful and hardworking girl. Having on his head a crown of ears of wheat. *Drăgaica* is carried in a procession through the village and even through the neighboring villages by a group of young girls, who sing and dance. On this occasion, rural celebrations and fairs are organized in many localities". (Doca, Gh., 2001: 37-38), "*Paparuda* is a little girl dressed in garlands of branches and leaves who passes, together with a group of children, by the village fountains. She is drenched with water drawn from the well while singing a rhythmic song by which rain is invoked." (Doca, Gh., 2001: 39); or about pastoral customs, those related to animal husbandry: "The most characteristic phenomenon related to animal husbandry is *transhumance* (...) This word indicates the periodic migration of flocks of sheep, which, in the spring, went up to graze up in the mountains, and in winter they went down to areas more protected from snow and cold, usually in the Danube meadow or along the rivers that cross Romania. This regular "pendulum" between the mountains and the plains is one of the factors that explain the unity of the Romanian language". (Doca, Gh., 2001: 41).

Traditional Christmas and New Year's customs bring real joy to foreign students, in which they often actively participate, by decorating the tree, singing carols or tasting traditional dishes specific to the period. The traditional customs of the area in which they are studying Romanian as a foreign language are presented to them in particular: "In the Oltenia area, many Christmas traditions are closely related to rituals of purification and discovery of the bear by unmarried girls. On the Eve, the scormonit in the fire takes place: all family members, regardless of age, throw a stick into the fire and say a few verses that are meant to protect the household from diseases and bring a rich and fruitful new year. Sometimes carolers are invited to do the same. (...) The carolers then receive pretzels, apples, pears, boiled grains, cage, boiled brandy and wine". (Burtea-Cioroianu, C.-E., 2019: 254); "In Transylvania, wishes through carols, presented by groups of young people, are still widespread. They form a group about a month before Christmas and, under the leadership of the "vaataf" chosen by them, learn the repertoire of carols. (...) They adapt according to the specifics of each house where the New Year's wishes are presented; there are carols for the widow, for the house with a girl to marry, for the house with a boy who has gone to the army, for the hunter, etc.". (Doca, Gh., 2001: 47); "(...) the text of the *Plowman / Pluguşorului* - a custom that is practiced throughout Romania - is unique. In it, a complete agricultural cycle is described, narrating, in verses of great beauty, the course of agricultural work, from sowing wheat to reaping and baking bread". (Doca, Gh., 2001: 48)

The culture of the Romanian people is a set of unique material and spiritual values, which are the product of historical evolution, because any people translates its historical experience into a suite of cultural creations, which become components of its life, being works and values crystallized in the language, in art, religion, science, philosophy, in social and political thought, works that, along with material and technical achievements, crystallize a national identity. Our cultural heritage also plays an essential

role as a tool for cultural, social and economic development, as elements of the past are continuously reinterpreted and given different functions and relevance in contemporary life.

Tradition represents the active part of cultural heritage, a specific universe of material and spiritual values, taking over ideas and formulas from the experience of other cultures and civilizations, with which it came into contact, a heritage that Romanian society has transmitted from one generation to another, ensuring our identity in the horizon of the modern world, and what remains alive from the cultural past are the elements that shape the present. In the course of its modern history, the Romanian people produced a set of values that give it identity and a distinct place in European civilization, which make up our cultural heritage. Romanian popular culture was formed together with the Romanian people, as a Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic culture, and on the territory of Romania we are dealing with creations of folk art that are among the most interesting and oldest manifestations of European folk art.

By visiting museums or participating in folk dance performances, foreign students discover not only aspects of the history of the Romanian people, but also elements of folk art, costume and folk dance, activities carried out in an agrarian community and get closer of the essence of this people and a better understanding of the people and the Romanian language. Thus, "today's popular Romanian ceramics continue, to a good extent, the ancient traditions of pottery. (...) the black pottery from the area of the city of Rădăuți, in northern Moldavia, continues the black pottery specific to pre-Roman Dacia, and the red pottery from Oltenia, Muntenia, Dobrogea, southern Moldavia and Transylvania and Banat has its sources in the red pottery of the Roman tradition, which it developed especially after the conquest of Dacia by the Romans". (Doca, Gh., 2001: 59-60); "(...) folk dances do not belong only to choreographic art. Like other folkloric manifestations, the dances are characterized by syncretism, since elements belonging to different arts outside of choreography participate in their realization, we meet here music, dramatic art and even literature, to which, through the beautiful costumes of the dancers, the decorative arts are added. (...) The dances in folk performances are, both on stage and in reality, endowed with a social-entertaining function. There are, however, also ritual or ceremonial dances, practiced within fecundity or fertility rites (*Paparuda, Călușul, Drăgaica*), as well as on the occasion of some celebrations (for example, dancing *Gots / Caprei* or *Căiuții*, which are part of the cycle of Christmas and New Year holidays)". (Doca, Gh., 2001: 64-65)

The elements of culture that define the Romanian language and that are instilled in foreign students develop their socio-cultural competence through a better knowledge and acquisition of social rules, norms of interpersonal interaction, historical and cultural knowledge of the Romanian people. Foreign students, once they come into contact with Romanian customs and traditions, can find similarities with those of their countries of origin. We find this interesting aspect especially when traditional Romanian dishes are presented and students from different corners of the world enthusiastically present their beloved traditional dishes and also find similarities between their dishes and those specific to our country. The aim of addressing these topics is to arouse the interest of foreign students in the culture of the country where they have decided to pursue their studies, in their own culture and in the culture of their group mates.

Thus, for example, an imagined dialogue at a Romanian-specific restaurant can create a general picture of traditional Romanian dishes: "Omar: - My favorite food is rice with vegetables and pieces of meat.// Mihai: - I always eat soup or then a traditional

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soup like sarmalele or stuffed peppers, or polenta with cheese and cream. For dessert I prefer papanas or pancakes with sweet cheese and raisins, maybe some cookies or a slice of cake.//Omar: For dessert I eat apple pie or ice cream". (Burtea-Cioroianu, C.-E., 2019: 69)

In this context, the dishes specific to Romanian cuisine are discussed such as: sarmalele, mămăliga with cheese and cream, small with mustard, papanasi, cozonac, different pies with cheese or apples. Then, in the same Romanian language as a foreign language course, the students are also asked about their traditional foods and an intercultural exchange of information takes place. The Arab students say that they prefer to eat rice with vegetables and pieces of meat, or labneh ( a thick thick yogurt), marakish (a simple, flat dough bread), kunafa (cheese in desserts) then Serbians prefer to eat from their traditional cuisine: plescavița (a kind of hamburger), banita (Serbian cheese pie), schnitzel karadjordje (beef schnitzel stuffed with caimac), aivar (a type of sausage), and Albanians eat: burek (pastry), ferges (prepared with peppers and feta cheese), tave kosi (baked lamb with yogurt), tarator (soup cold cucumber with yogurt and garlic), pispili (thin Albanian pancake rolls filled with meat), trilece (Albanian milk cake dessert), etc.

Therefore, the teaching of culture in Romanian as a foreign language courses is often done by using cultural examples for exemplification and for a better understanding of the general learning framework, in this way foreign students can analyze and understand the relationship between language and cultural phenomena. Whether we practice individual skills (writing, speaking, reading, listening) or integrated, culture will always be in the background, giving our endeavor a meaningful content. We can choose culturally relevant texts and fragments of texts. We can do the same with the passages to be heard, as the online environment offers a varied range of sources that can be downloaded in this regard. Vocabulary exercises can also be chosen to be culturally relevant in terms of content, or ideas and topics for class discussions and debates can be based on cultural messages.

According Bloju, „Our opinion ranges somehow at a fair distance between achievement and behaviour culture as we consider that both of them can be useful in teaching culture through language if we operate a careful selection of topics to be studied and goals to be attained. Thus, topics like history, geography and music (lyrics) can be approached by cooperative learning, fully combined with behaviours in task-oriented approaches”. (Bloju, C., L., 2022: 290) The attention of the teacher who integrates cultural aspects in the process of teaching a foreign language must also focus on the linguistic profile of foreign students, on their attitude, behavior and learning style, resulting in their active participation in the course, developing and thus intercultural communication competence.

### **Conclusions**

Finding ways to integrate cultural aspects into the teaching-learning process of a foreign language in the most efficient way possible, by avoiding culturally problematic aspects, remains a wish. Therefore, "(...) the cultural context is more complex than the language and history of the individual or groups; but its importance for the entire orientation of human life is well known, without excluding the possibility of changes as a result of the influences of other cultures. Therefore, culture cannot be considered as limited to a sum of artistic works, but is rather seen as a system of symbols, values, knowledge, spiritual and material creations in continuous evolution; it is a complex



capital in which people find, select and create ideas to organize their action". (Diaconu, I., 2012: 12)

Thus, the integration of aspects of a cultural nature in the process of teaching Romanian as a foreign language requires the teacher, right from the beginning, to show the necessary cultural awareness in choosing the cultural contexts used for exemplification and practice and the materials necessary to carry out the activity, in order to avoid possible slips. The importance of the cultural component is vital in teaching the Romanian language as a foreign language, because the acquisition of the Romanian language automatically implies the acquisition of the culture that uses this language. Language and culture are two inseparable entities. Learning a language involves learning a culture and vice versa. To communicate successfully, it is necessary to associate language with other culturally determined behaviors. Otherwise, we are dealing with surface learning, devoid of meaning, substrate and sustainability.

The importance of culture in education is based on the system of values with which we leave the family, school or promote among the people we come into contact with, which makes us different from each other. At the same time, art and culture give rise to strong bonds between people and prove their contribution in achieving a higher level of acceptance of diversity between states, cultures and people, but also in reducing the degree of intolerance and discrimination towards others. The Romanian spirit gathers its identity essence, in the language and culture of the Romanian people.

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