

Romanian as a Foreign Language: Romanian in the Imaginary of the Foreign Student in the Preparatory Year Study Program. The Linguistic and Intercultural Competence of the Foreign Student

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complexities of intercultural identity development, focusing on the challenges faced by foreigners adapting to a new cultural context. The movement into a new dimension of perception, experience, and education results in boundary ambiguity, where the individuals' original cultural identities become fluid. This process involves internal conflicts, ambivalent moments, and a constant negotiation between loyalty to one's original culture and the need to adapt. The paper also examines how foreign students in Romania experience "personal shock" and how cultural tolerance is often prioritized over respect for the host country, hindering the development of a balanced intercultural identity.

KEYWORDS: *acquisition of a foreign language, linguistic competence, preparatory year, Romanian as a foreign language, Romanian studies*

Introduction

The movement of individuals into a new dimension of perception, experience, and education leads to boundary ambiguity. As a result, the original cultural identity begins to lose its distinctiveness and rigidity, while the emergence of a new identity signifies an increase in interculturality. This process represents a form of self-transcendence, allowing individuals to reach an open system beyond the barriers of their own existence. Consequently, the development of intercultural identity places foreigners in a perpetual state of negotiating the new structure of reality.

The impressions perceived in the social field, both from others and oneself, along with their retention for future reference, become integral parts of a person's evolution. However, this development is far from peaceful, as it involves internal conflicts between loyalty to one's original identity and the need to embrace a new one. The process is marked by ambivalent moments, ups and downs, and advances and setbacks. Intense stress can abruptly reverse the direction of this process, leading to regression, where foreigners re-identify with and reaffirm their ethnic

origins. Such situations often result in a state of alienation, discomfort, and tension in maintaining the new identity.

Although these psychological conflicts are inherent in the development of intercultural identity, the process extends beyond them. Faced with the challenges of intercultural adaptation, newcomers experience a phenomenon known as “personal shock”—a profound disruption of their connection to their original group and a merging of psychological ties with humanity as a whole. Unlike cultural identity, which ties a person to a specific culture, intercultural identity links individuals to multiple cultural universes and, ultimately, to humanity itself. This new form of identity is not rooted in the concept of belonging, which implies ownership or exclusivity to a particular culture, but rather in a style of self-awareness that situates the individual neither fully inside nor outside the cultural context.

They are also capable of experiencing different cultural phenomena, demonstrating a remarkable ability to make decisions and take action in specific situations, without being compelled to adhere to the dominant norms of their culture of origin or the rigidity of the host culture. As a result, their identity becomes more flexible, exhibiting a high level of interculturality and incorporating elements of emotional self-identification that transcend any particular group. This type of identity empowers individuals to decipher unfamiliar cultural stimuli and navigate and appreciate cultural diversity.

Often, in the process of teaching and learning the Romanian language by foreign students in the preparatory year program, the importance of embracing the cultural identity of the host country and adapting to its culture is downplayed. Instead, there is an emphasis on concepts such as cultural, racial, and religious tolerance, with the intention of preserving their own culture. This approach overlooks the respect foreign students should show towards the country that will provide them with professional training for several years. This is a serious concern, as it fosters the idea that they are entitled to anything simply because they are foreigners, while the host country is expected to respect and accommodate their preferences. In this paper, I will explore the factors contributing to this misguided prioritization of the foreign students’ interests, which undermines the respect owed to the Romanian people and state.

Romanian language as a foreign language

A community is said to speak its language not for outsiders or foreigners, but solely for itself — “Une communauté sociale ne parle jamais sa langue pour les

étrangers.” (Marchand, 1989). Consequently, when a foreigner learns the language of a particular community, they are learning a language that is inherently spoken within that group, not intended for those outside it. Speakers instinctively associate any foreign language (FL) as distinct from their mother tongue (MT). Given this fundamental idea, for a native Romanian speaker, the notion of Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) might seem contradictory and challenging to embrace.

In the mind of a native speaker, the idea that their mother tongue could be perceived as a foreign language studied by outsiders may evoke a sense of paradox or unfamiliarity. This notion challenges the intrinsic association of one’s native language with personal and cultural identity, raising questions about how it can simultaneously belong to the intimate sphere of native speakers and be approached as an external, learnable object by foreigners. It may also prompt reflections on how outsiders experience and interpret the language differently, emphasizing the complex duality of language as both a marker of internal community identity and an accessible tool for external learners.

How does the Romanian language appear in the linguistic imaginary of a foreigner?

Currently, Poland, through its cultural institutes, is adopting the Korean model to promote the Polish language as a valuable cultural asset abroad. The goal is to leverage storytelling and cultural elements to create soft power that showcases Poland’s strengths.

South Korea promotes its cultural identity globally, with its language serving as a key cultural asset. Korean is studied not only across Asia but also in Europe, Africa, the Americas, and beyond.

How does the Romanian language achieve recognition as an exportable language? Or can we, in fact, assert that it currently holds this status?

In our study, we aim to address the following questions:

1. What reasons might lead a foreigner to choose Romanian as a language to study?
2. What factors motivate international students to select Romania as their study destination?
3. How do foreign students perceive the Romanian language?
4. What challenges prevent foreign students from achieving proficiency in spoken Romanian?

5. What factors support and encourage foreign students in speaking Romanian accurately?

Mission and objectives of the Romanian as a foreign language teacher collectives. Preparatory Year study program

Each semester, intensive Romanian language courses are organized for foreign students who come to study for a semester or an academic year at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, through various international academic exchange programs and projects, such as the Erasmus Plus program, Erasmus Mundus projects: AL IDRISI, IANUS, EDEN, EMERGE, SILKROUTE, etc.

The Romanian language preparatory program for foreign citizens is a traditional program of the Faculty of Letters at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi. This program is designed for foreigners who do not speak Romanian and wish to pursue undergraduate or postgraduate studies in Romania, with courses taught in Romanian. Its aim is to prepare foreign students for learning the Romanian language and the specialized vocabulary necessary for them to handle various communication situations in daily life, as well as the academic requirements set by Romanian-language study programs.

The aim of the Romanian language preparatory program for foreign citizens is to train foreign citizens accepted into undergraduate or postgraduate programs conducted in Romanian within an academic institutional framework. The goal is to develop their general and professional linguistic communication skills in Romanian, in accordance with the minimum B1 level requirements defined in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* of the Council of Europe.

The objective of the Romanian language preparatory program for foreign citizens is to facilitate the development of communication skills in Romanian, both written and spoken, at the minimum B1 level (independent user), required for admission to undergraduate or postgraduate programs conducted in Romanian within the higher education system in Romania.

In parallel with acquiring linguistic skills, the program also includes a Romanian cultural and civilization component, thus contributing to the development of

adaptation and interaction skills in a new sociocultural context for the participants in this study program.¹

Romanian as a foreign language from a native speaker's perspective

For a Romanian speaker not involved in teaching Romanian as a foreign language, accepting the concept of Romanian as a foreign language can be challenging. Moreover, this relationship between Romanian as a native language and a foreign language is further influenced by historical, social, cultural, and economic factors.

Although Romanian was recognized as an official European Union language in 2007, and EU language policy aims to discourage discrimination against languages and their categorization into majority and minority languages, Romanian is still considered part of the small language family, both by foreigners and by its native speakers. As a result, Romanians appear to be marked by the complex that their language does not belong to the great languages of culture, as noted by the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran:

Să fie oare utopie, dacă am crede că România ar putea să se ridice vreodată peste nivelul și fatalitatea culturilor mici? [...] O anumită generozitate cu România mă face să cred că ea ar putea depăși cercul îngust al culturilor mici. Acest condițional definește condiția noastră. Că ea nu se va putea ridica niciodată la nivelul și semnificația culturilor mari este un fapt sigur, ce nu merită a fi discutat.²

Under these circumstances, the Romanian speaker finds it difficult to understand why a foreigner might show interest in the Romanian language. Questions such as the following might appear:

- Who would want to learn Romanian nowadays?
- What benefit is there for a foreigner to know Romanian?
- What can you do with Romanian?

These questions highlight not only a distorted and limited perception of the status of the Romanian language but also its place within the broader context of European languages, and beyond.

Furthermore, such an attitude of astonishment becomes uncomfortable when it comes from Romanians who seem shocked that the Romanian language—

¹ For documentation, the official page of the Department of Romanian Language for Foreign Students was consulted: <https://lrtsuaic.wixsite.com/uaic/lrsl>.

² Source of the quote:

https://www.poezie.ro/index.php/essay/147454/Schimbarea_la_fa%C8%9B%C4%83_a_Rom%C3%A2niei.

considered by some to be “small” and “culturally unimportant”—could be of interest or serve as a subject of study for foreigners.

The devaluation of their own language is evident when Romanians opt to converse in an international language or the native language of foreigners, instead of speaking Romanian with the foreigners who are actively learning it.

However, excluding the Romanian language from the list of languages used for communication with foreigners and adopting “major” languages can also signal a broader inability to recognize the value of minority languages and cultures (Byram, 1992).

According to the theory of social representation in language teaching, a concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, the image of the other’s language plays a crucial role in shaping how alterity is perceived and classified in general (Zarate, 1993). It also establishes the “power relationship” between participants in the communicative act. In this context, the initiative of a native Romanian speaker to speak in another language, rather than Romanian, could be interpreted as an attempt by the speaker to construct a more favorable image in the eyes of the interlocutor by using a “major” language.

From a psycholinguistic and anthropological perspective, the effects of an identity construction that associates Romanian identity with the harmonious nature of the Romanian language can be observed. This linguistic imagery seems to prevent the native Romanian speaker from recognizing the harmony of their mother tongue in the less-than-harmonious productions of non-native speakers.

The profile of the student in the *Preparatory Year* study program

The students in the preparatory year study program are mostly individuals who have already completed their undergraduate studies in their home country and have decided to pursue a master’s program in Romania. In the groups I coordinated, there were also individuals who had just graduated from high school in their home country and chose to pursue university studies in Romania, typically in Medicine. Many of them had left their families for the first time and were experiencing a culture different from their own. The students’ ages ranged from 18 to 32 years old. The students come from the following countries: Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Pakistan, Turkey, and Morocco. After completing the preparatory year program, they were set to study at the following faculties: Letters, Arts, Economics and Business Administration, History, Computer Science, and Law.

Regarding their motivation for choosing to study in Romania, the students shared the following reasons:

- They were encouraged or advised by relatives, such as uncles or parents.
- Some had siblings who had already studied in Iași and shared the advantages of attending university in Romania.
- Romania's membership in the European Union and its status as a European country, which they believe will / would benefit them later in life.
- Many planned to use Erasmus scholarships to study in other countries, such as Sweden, France, or Portugal, with the intention of settling there in the future.
- Romania is seen as a transit country that offers opportunities for creating a secure future.
- Romania was their second, third, or fourth option after being rejected by other countries but accepted here.

Romanian from the perspective of the foreign student in the *Preparatory Year*

When asked why they chose Romania as the country to study and specialize in a field, several “local parameters” (Platon, 2021) were identified as playing a fundamental role in their decision. These include the specificity of the host culture, the teaching tradition, the organizational structure of universities, the uniqueness of the curriculum, an interest in the Eastern European region, as well as Romania's history, society, and culture.

In order to get a picture of the foreign students' attitudes towards the Romanian language, Romania and Romanians, they answered a series of questions.

When foreign students in the preparatory year were asked to write the first five words or sentences that came to mind about the Romanian language, they shared their perceptions and relationship with it. However, it's worth noting that some misunderstood the prompt, thinking they were supposed to describe the Romanian language rather than respond *in* Romanian.

Therefore, their word choices can be categorized based on:

- frequency and usefulness: common words and phrases like *Bună!* (Hello!), *Bună dimineața!* (Good morning!), *Mulțumesc!* (Thank you!), *La revedere!* (Goodbye!), *Ce faci?* (How are you?), *mâncare* (food), *iubire* (love), etc.;
- level of difficulty: words with complex structures, such as *străzile* (the streets) and *ouăle* (the eggs);
- emblematic character: culturally representative words, such as *Dracula*, *vampir* (vampire), *sarmale* (cabbage rolls), *Eminescu* (a famous Romanian poet), *mămăligă* (polenta), *ciorbă* (sour soup), and *Cuza* (a historical figure).

In terms of their perception of the Romanian language, they refer to its level of linguistic or learning difficulty with words such as *grea* (hard), *ușoară* (easy), *simplă* (simple), *dificilă* (difficult), and *complicată* (complex).

According to foreign students in the preparatory year, they describe the Romanian language as follows:

- *Limba română este formată din masculin, feminin și neutru.*
(Romanian has masculine, feminine, and neuter genders.)
- *Limba română este foarte dificilă, mai ales verbele.*
(Romanian is very difficult, especially the verbs.)
- *Gramatica este grea.*
(The grammar is hard.)
- *Oamenii vorbesc repede, este dificil să înțeleg totul.*
(People speak quickly, and it's hard to understand everything.)
- *Fiecare lucru are gen.*
(Every noun has a gender.)
- *Verbul are multe forme diferite.*
(The verb has many different forms.)
- *Există multe cuvinte similare cu cele din engleză.*
(There are many words similar to those in English.)

Regarding the qualities of Romanian, students described it as *frumoasă* (beautiful), *vocalică* (vocalic), *muzicală* (musical), *bogată* (rich), *interesantă* (interesting), and *provocatoare* (challenging).

Among their motivations for studying Romanian, they mentioned:

- for their future;
- to communicate with patients;
- to talk with their girlfriend or boyfriend.

Much depends on how teachers of Romanian as a foreign language present and teach the language, as we will later see how their approach shapes the learners' perceptions and understanding of Romanian as they progress in their studies.

The linguistic competence of foreign students

In the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR, 2003), linguistic competence is defined as follows:

competența care îi permite unei persoane să acționeze, utilizând cu precădere mijloacele lingvistice (CECR, 2003)

(the competence which enables a person to act, using mainly linguistic means).

Linguistic competence encompasses lexical, phonological, and syntactical knowledge, as well as language-related skills. These skills represent various aspects of language as a system, separate from the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the practical functions of its applications in communication (CEFR, 2003). Acquiring, developing, and applying these components help improve communication abilities, which include understanding spoken or written texts and producing written or oral messages.

For teachers of Romanian as a foreign language, linguistic competence is a central focus, representing the primary goal for students to achieve. However, it is not the only competency foreign students must acquire. The CEFR highlights that overall communicative competence is composed of several elements: the linguistic component, the sociolinguistic component, and the pragmatic component. Each of these components consists primarily of knowledge, skills, and abilities (CEFR, 2003). This broader view underscores the importance of teaching a range of competencies to support the students' full integration and language use in diverse contexts.

Linguistic barrier and its effects on foreign students' integration and success

During the process of learning a new language, many foreign students encounter a significant linguistic barrier. For those who struggle to gain proficiency in Romanian, this barrier becomes an obstacle to adapting fully to the host society. Without a conversational grasp of the language, these students often face difficulties in forming friendships with native Romanians, which can negatively affect their motivation and lower their self-esteem. This lack of confidence may also impact their belief in their own abilities, creating a cycle where they feel less capable of progressing.

The linguistic barrier not only limits social interactions but also restricts the students' full participation in essential aspects of life. This restriction can lead to lower academic grades, reduce their earning potential, and narrow the freedom to make personal and career choices. Over time, this barrier can also hinder cognitive development, as limited language proficiency results in knowing less and being able to accomplish fewer tasks.

A related risk is language fossilization, where students may develop the belief that improvement is impossible. This mindset, often arising from the frustration of limited progress, can prevent further attempts to master the language, leaving students feeling resigned to their current skill level.

Extra-linguistic barrier: comfort level and teaching adjustments

Another critical factor is the extra-linguistic barrier, often tied to a student's comfort level in a multicultural, multi-level learning environment. As the need to work with groups of varying language proficiency grows, this approach brings both advantages and challenges. Teaching mixed-level groups can foster peer learning and inclusivity, but it can also create uneven progress and make it challenging to address all students' individual needs effectively.

In these settings, the role of the teacher expands beyond language instruction. Teachers must take on a supportive role similar to that of a psychologist, as they encounter student concerns that reach beyond grammatical understanding. Managing such dynamics requires sensitivity and adaptability, as teachers often address emotional and motivational issues that affect the students' learning experiences and their broader integration into Romanian society.

Linguistic attitudes and their role in learning Romanian

The willingness to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner when a foreign student is asked to perform in the Romanian language is closely connected to several factors that influence the process of learning Romanian. These factors include linguistic identity, linguistic fidelity, linguistic conflict, linguistic attitudes, and others. This socio-psychological concept, while difficult to observe and measure directly and objectively, is often understood through inferences drawn from the student's behavior and responses.

Thus, the attitude that a foreign student has towards the Romanian language, as well as towards their own language, reflects their positive or negative feelings about Romanian. These attitudes can reveal how the student perceives the difficulty or simplicity of the language, the ease or challenge of learning Romanian, and the importance of the language in their personal and academic life. Additionally, factors such as the perceived elegance of the language and its associated social status can influence the student's attitude.

The attitude a student holds towards Romanian also extends to their perception of the speakers of the language. A foreign student may form judgments about the Romanian-speaking community, which can further shape their engagement with the language.

It is important to note that linguistic attitudes are dynamic and can change over time, depending on the individual's experiences, the contexts in which they are asked to use Romanian, and their evolving relationship with the language. For instance, a student's attitude can be influenced by their academic progress, social interactions, or personal experiences with Romanian speakers.

For the language to be valued, it must prove its utility to the student. Attitudes are a significant factor in language learning because they influence motivation and engagement. Regardless of the student's intelligence or natural aptitude, attitudes toward Romanian play a crucial role in their success. Various elements contribute to shaping these attitudes: the teacher, whether learning Romanian is compulsory or optional, the interference of other foreign languages, the student's feelings towards the Romanian-speaking community, the textbook used, and the overall educational infrastructure.

Building a positive attitude is crucial because it can ease the learning process and help ensure that the student continues to use and value the language even after formal education ends. For example, Polish students, after completing their studies, may seek to maintain a connection with the Romanian-speaking

community, demonstrating an integrative orientation in addition to their instrumental orientation—a focus on academic success or passing exams.

Additionally, linguistic loyalty and its associated defensive mechanisms represent a phenomenon where speakers preserve their native language—whether through its functions, structure, or vocabulary. This form of loyalty is deeply ingrained in every speaker, as the emotional connection to one's mother tongue makes any deviation from it seem unappealing. This emotional bond with the native language often leads to a sense of attachment that protects it from perceived external influences. (Weinreich, 2013)

The intercultural competence of the foreign student. The challenge of adapting to Romanian culture for foreign students

For many foreign students, Romania is the first country they visit, making it their initial exposure to a culture very different from their own. For some, adapting to the new culture of the host country can be an extremely challenging experience. Many students tend to stay within their own communities, preferring not to interact with Romanians. When asked if they socialize with their Romanian colleagues, their answer is often negative.

To address this, in the second semester of the preparatory year, there is a course dedicated to Romanian cultural identity. In the first lesson, students were asked about their knowledge of Romanian culture in its various forms—such as music, literature, art, and films. Many of them admitted they knew little or nothing about Romanian culture.

To help bridge this gap, various workshops are organized on special cultural days throughout the year, such as 1st March, Christmas, 24th January, and Easter. These workshops aim to introduce foreign students to different aspects of Romanian culture. For instance, some workshops were held in partnership with the Palace of Culture in Iași through the DICE workshops. In these sessions, students first learned about the cultural significance of the event being celebrated, followed by hands-on activities, such as painting Easter eggs or making marzipan.

Through these activities, students are given the opportunity to engage with Romanian traditions, promoting a deeper understanding of the culture while fostering interaction between foreign students and Romanians.

Conclusions

The role of a Romanian as a Foreign Language teacher extends to promoting the Romanian language as a valuable cultural asset. In many ways, the teacher serves as an unofficial ambassador, advocating for both the language and culture, while helping to globalize Romanian studies. The way in which the teacher shapes the students' perception of the Romanian language throughout their learning journey plays a crucial role in this process. It is essential that the Romanian language proves its relevance and utility to the student, as attitude is a key factor in successful language learning.

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