CHALENGES OF LEARNING ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Bogdan Mihai DASCĂLU
„Titu Maiorescu"-Institute of Socio-Human Research,
Romanian Academy, Timișoara Branch, Romania

Abstract: This paper examines the main difficulties encountered by foreign students when learning Romanian, focusing on the peculiarities of the enclitic definite article, the structure of the verb groups and suffixal verbs, as well as verbs whose root changes during conjugation. In addition, other significant obstacles are addressed, such as vowel and consonant alternations, the irregular plural of nouns, the formation of numerals, and the challenge of determining the aspectual values of verbs. To assess the impact of these difficulties on the process of learning Romanian, the paper includes a case study conducted with a group of foreign students, analysing the teaching strategies employed, the frequency of errors, and the methods by which these can be effectively corrected. The findings highlight the need for a differentiated pedagogical approach, tailored both to the learners' linguistic profile and to the specific features of the Romanian language, and propose innovative didactic solutions to facilitate the learning process.

Keywords: Romanian as a Foreign Language, grammatical difficulties, teaching methods, contrastive strategy, education

1. Introduction

Although Romanian is part of the Romance language family, it exhibits several particularities that significantly differentiate it from its sister languages, such as Italian, Spanish, or French. These differences, which are morphological, syntactic, and phonological in nature, create specific difficulties for native speakers of other languages, especially those originating from Germanic or Slavic language backgrounds.

This study is based on my direct experience, accumulated over more than two decades of teaching Romanian as a foreign language in international contexts: at the University of Heidelberg, where I coordinated the Romanian department within the Romance Studies Seminar for four years, as well as in the Erasmus programs at the University of Bucharest and the Polytechnic University of Timișoara.

The present work aims to identify the main challenges encountered by foreign students in the process of learning Romanian, to analyse the causes of these difficulties in relation to the structure of the Romanian language, to provide concrete examples from teaching practice, and to propose viable pedagogical solutions to facilitate the learning process.

In today's dynamic society, foreign language skills and intercultural communication are essential, as they are becoming increasingly important in both everyday life and professional contexts. Technological advancement and globalization intensify the necessity to learn new languages and engage with foreign cultures, especially in the context of growing international interconnectedness. As Dascălu

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emphasizes, this increasing interconnectedness presents a central challenge that requires targeted language learning and intercultural understanding:

> ”In our constantly changing society, foreign languages and communication play a very important role, whether in everyday life, in professional settings, or in any form of linguistic and intercultural encounters. The rapid development of technology and its influence across all areas contribute to making the learning of foreign languages and engagement with new, unfamiliar cultures indispensable. Foreign language skills are becoming a necessity in almost all fields of work, especially in the context of globalization and the increase of international interconnectedness.” (Dascălu, 2024: 152)

2. The enclitic definite article

For a speaker of a language other than Romanian, the enclitic definite article proves to be a constant source of confusion, as it contradicts the expectations formed by other linguistic systems and challenges the grammatical instincts of the learner; at the same time, precisely because of this peculiarity, it remains one of the most unusual features of the Romanian language a defining element that surprises and intrigues anyone approaching its structure for the first time. While in most European languages the article precedes the noun („the book”, „das Buch”), in Romanian it is attached to the end of the word: „carte” – „cartea”.

To illustrate how the enclitic definite article functions concretely in Romanian, it is worth mentioning a few illustrative examples: *liniște – „Ruhe” / „silence”*, *liniștea – „die Ruhe” / „the silence”*, *codru – „Wald” / „forest”*, *codrul – „der Wald” / „the forest”*, *liniștea codrului – „die Ruhe des Waldes” / „the silence of the forest”*.

From a teaching perspective, this particularity requires adapted instructional strategies. Among the most effective are the visual comparison of articles in different languages, fill-in-the-blank and translation exercises in everyday contexts (Nistor, 2023), the use of images and repetitive stories that reinforce the structure in memory, as well as contrastive exercises between Romanian and the learners’ native language, aimed at highlighting the differences in article placement.

3. Vowel and consonant alternations

Phonetic alternations between singular and plural forms or between verb tenses are not merely a simple linguistic feature, but often represent a major challenge for foreign learners. These variations, which appear to occur without a clear rule, create uncertainty and complicate the memorization process, as the student must retain not only the base word but also its modified form in different grammatical contexts. To illustrate these difficulties, some of the most representative vowel alternations can be mentioned: *soră – surori* (o → u + o) / „sister – sisters”, *om – oameni* (o → oa) / „man / people”, *noapte – nopți* (oa → o) / „night-nights”, to which consonant alternations are added: *drac – draci / „devil-devils”*, *frate – frați / „brother-brothers”*, *urs – urși / „bear-bears”*.

From a didactic perspective, these phenomena require special attention and a gradual approach. An effective strategy involves organizing the vocabulary into phonetic families, allowing learners to observe recurring patterns and internalize the differences. Repetition, both auditory and visual, is essential for consolidating these forms, and associating images with the plural form helps strengthen the connection between sound and meaning. In addition, exercises that combine phonetic transcription with auditory

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recognition activities can gradually reinforce the ability to identify these alternations, turning an apparent difficulty into an efficient learning mechanism.

4. Irregular verbs and root modifications

Although officially only a few Romanian verbs are classified as irregular, teaching experience shows that for most foreign learners, the entire Romanian conjugation system appears unpredictable. This perception is explained by the extensive variations in root, stress, and endings, which create an impression of constant instability and challenge the linguistic intuition of learners. The situation becomes even more challenging as these changes do not always follow an easily recognizable pattern. For example, common verbs such as: *a merge* (to go) with the forms „merg, mergi", *a ști* („to know") with the forms „știu, știi", or *a vrea („to want")*, with the forms „vreau, vrei", exhibit root or accent alternations that surprise anyone approaching Romanian for the first time. Furthermore, verbs like *a mânca* („to eat"), which turn into *„mănânc"* (I eat), *„mănânci*" (you eat), also introduce a root modification through infixation, adding an additional layer of complexity.

The traditional classification of verbs also contributes to this perception of irregularity. In theory, Romanian has four verb groups, but in practice, the reality is more nuanced: due to numerous subdivisions, no fewer than seven conjugation patterns can be identified. Thus, verbs that appear similar in their endings, such as *a lucra* (to work) și *a fura* (to steal), behave grammatically in radically different ways, even though both end in *„-a*". A similar situation is found with verbs ending in "-i", such as *a citi* (to read) and *a fugi* (tor un), which, although they share the same ending, follow completely different inflectional patterns. Group IV is no exception either: the verbs *a coborî* (to go down / to get off) and *a dormi* (to sleep) officially belong to the same category, but exhibit particular features that clearly set them apart.

In such a context, teaching solutions must be not only corrective but also strategic. An effective approach begins by presenting verb conjugation based on the first-person singular form, which helps the learner quickly identify the inflectional pattern. Conjugation should be practiced in functional contexts, sentences, and mini-communication situations, so that the rules are internalized through use, not just memorized. Instead of a rigid theoretical classification, the teacher can propose dividing verbs into the seven actual conjugation patterns, which are much clearer in practice. Furthermore, mini-dialogues and role-playing become valuable tools: they transform mechanical exercises into interactive activities, allowing learners to practice verb forms in situations like real-life contexts, thereby reinforcing both grammatical accuracy and fluency of expression.

5. The verb phrase and the difficulty of verbal aspect

For speakers of Romance or Germanic languages, the category of tense is usually the first grammatical landmark they assimilate when learning a foreign language. In contrast, the notion of verbal aspect remains a much more subtle feature and is often difficult to identify. This discrepancy explains why many students instinctively opt for a simplified solution: they use the compound perfect almost exclusively to express any action that took place in the past, considering it a kind of "universal past tense." In doing so, the essential distinction between "what happened" and "what was happening at the moment of another event" becomes blurred, and the aspectual value of the utterance is lost.

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The direct consequence is a tendency to avoid the imperfect tense or to use it arbitrarily, without awareness of the contexts in which it expresses an ongoing, repeated, or unfinished action. This often leads to overgeneralization, where the compound perfect is applied even in cases where the narrative logic calls for the imperfect. Two simple examples illustrate this confusion: in response to the question "What were you doing yesterday at 6 o'clock?" the correct answer is in the imperfect tense to convey an action in progress; whereas "What did you do last night?" calls for the compound perfect, as it refers to a completed event.

From a teaching perspective, overcoming this difficulty requires a clear and gradual strategy. First, it is useful to present the aspectual value before detailing the purely temporal value, so that the student understands not only "when" an action takes place, but also "how" it unfolds. Diagrams and timelines can visualize overlapping events and make tangible the difference between a process in progress and one already completed. Transformation exercises, in which sentences in the perfect tense are rewritten in the imperfect and vice versa, help to reinforce the contrast, while short stories involving simultaneous actions encourage learners to correctly apply the two values, turning an abstract concept into a practical and conscious skill.

6. The gender of nouns (rules and exceptions)

The gender of a noun, when it is used with an indefinite article, constitutes a source of confusion for most foreign learners that often persists even after an extended period of study. The difficulty is not limited to simply identifying the gender—masculine, feminine, or neuter—but also extends to the correct agreement between articles, numerals, adjectives, and nouns, which must be simultaneously matched according to number and grammatical gender. To begin with, a few seemingly clear rules can be distinguished: masculine nouns use the indefinite article „un" in the singular – *un profesor* (a teacher), *un student* (a student), *un băiat* (a boy); the feminine ones use „o" – *o profesoară* (a teacher), *o studentă* (a student), *o fată* (a girl).

Things become more complicated, however, when the neuter gender comes into play. In the singular, it behaves like a masculine noun, but in the plural it takes forms identical to those of feminine nouns: *un scaun – două scaune (a chair – two chairs)*, *un creion – două creioane (a pencil – two pencils)*, *un exercițiu – două exerciții (an exercise – two exercises)*. Moreover, the plural indefinite article is the same for all three genders: *niște profesori*, *niște profesoare*, *niște scaune*, *niște creioane* (*some (male) teachers, some (female) teachers, some chairs, some pencils*).

This apparent homogenization of the plural amplifies learners' uncertainty and can lead them astray. It is not uncommon for students to believe that the gender of a noun changes completely when moving from singular to plural, for example, "the chair is neuter in the singular but feminine in the plural." However, gender is not a flexible feature of the word but a stable grammatical category whose expression varies only according to number. Understanding this subtle distinction requires not only memorizing rules but also gradually becoming familiar with the internal logic of the language, a process that demands practice and constant exposure to varied examples.

To determine the gender of a noun with certainty, the teacher can resort to what is often called in teaching practice „proba un/o – doi/două". This simple yet very effective method starts from the observation that when a noun is preceded by „un" and followed by the numeral „doi", we are dealing with a masculine noun – for example: *un copil – doi*

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copii (child – children). Conversely, if we use „o" followed by „două", the noun is feminine: *o fată – două fete* (girl –girls).

However, the exercise is not without pitfalls. Many students, captivated by the clarity of the test, end up confusing numeral forms with articles, stating, for example, that "*doi* is the plural article for masculine." Clearly, this is a classification error: *doi* and *două* They remain numerals, not articles, and the gender of the noun does not change based on these forms but is determined by an internal grammatical mechanism.

To avoid such confusion and to reinforce the understanding of the rules, a series of progressively structured teaching solutions is recommended. A first strategy consists of presenting a visual classification of genders using three-colored tables – blue for masculine, red for feminine, and violet for neuter, a color that suggests the combination of masculine and feminine features. Additionally, introducing nouns from the beginning in singular–plural pairs, such as: *un scaun – două scaune* (chair – chairs) or *un exercițiu – două exerciții* (exercise – exercises) helps the learner immediately perceive the correlation between form and gender. Instead of teaching the word "*scaun*" (chair) in isolation, it is more effective to present it directly as "un scaun – două scaune" (one chair – two chairs).

Sorting games can turn this learning stage into an interactive activity: students receive cards with pairs *un/o – doi/două* and must match them with images or the corresponding nouns. The analogy between the numeral and the article should be used only as a temporary tool, and the teacher has the duty to constantly emphasize that *doi* and *două* are numerals, not articles, and gender is determined by grammatical behavior, not by intuitive perceptionAlong the same lines, presenting the so-called "triad" noun–article–numeral is very helpful: *un scaun, două scaune, niște scaune (chair – chairs – some chairs)*; *o carte, două cărți, niște cărți* (book – books – some books).

In addition, controlled production activities can be proposed to reinforce this pattern in memory. For example, sentences with gaps to be filled in: „Am văzut ___ scaun și ___ creioane", „Pe masă era ___ carte și ___ caiete" – prompt learners to correctly apply articles and numerals, transforming a theoretical exercise into a practical and easily memorable activity.

All the aspects discussed above (from difficulties related to the enclitic definite article and phonetic alternations to problems with verb conjugation and the distinction between the compound perfect and imperfect) have also been investigated from an empirical perspective, in order to go beyond a purely theoretical level of analysis. To this end, that is, to better understand the extent of the difficulties faced by foreign learners of Romanian, we conducted a case study on a group of 26 Erasmus students from Germany, Austria, Poland, France, and Spain.

These young people, who were in Romania for a semester or an academic year, had Romanian language proficiency levels ranging from absolute beginner to low intermediate, and their experiences provide a relevant picture of the main grammatical pitfalls. Analysis of written materials and oral exercises, as well as spontaneous interactions during classes, revealed a series of recurring error patterns, which can be ranked not only by frequency but also by their impact on communication.

The most visible difficulty, encountered by approximately 75% of participants, is related to the correct use of the enclitic definite article. The students either omit the article entirely (they say „*carte frumoasă*" instead of „*cartea frumoasă*"), or they place it incorrectly, imitating the structures of their native languages: „*cartea frumoasă*" becomes often „*frumoasă cartea*" under the influence of French or German, where the article

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precedes the noun. Although this error may seem minor, it can radically change the meaning of the sentence and is resistant to correction, requiring repetitive exercises and varied communicative contexts.

In second place, with 68%, are the confusions related to the gender of nouns. Many students tend to avoid using article forms or adjective agreement to avoid making mistakes. For example, they prefer to say „*am cumpărat carte*" without an article, or „*profesor bun*" even when referring to a female teacher, in order to avoid deciding on the gender. This systematic avoidance reveals not only a lack of confidence but also the fact that the rules of the neuter gender, which combine masculine and feminine behaviors, are difficult to internalize.

Phonetic alternations between singular and plural forms or between verb forms cause lexical confusion in approximately 55% of learners. Students particularly struggle with nouns such as *om – oameni* or *soră – surori*, where the vowel change cannot be logically deduced. A clear example is the plural *nopți* (nights) of the noun *noapte* (night), where the transformation *oa → o* captures and creates memory blocks. In speech, this uncertainty leads to improvised pluralizations „*noaptei*" sau „*omuri*", which do not exist in the standard language.

Irregular verbs and root changes represent another major source of errors, with a frequency of 70%. Students tend to overgeneralize regular patterns: for example, they try to conjugate the verb *a vrea* (to want) according to the regular pattern of Group I verbs, resulting in hybrid forms such as „*vra*" or „*vreiem*". Also, verbs like *a merge* (to go) or *a ști* (to want), with changing roots, are perceived as exceptions that contradict the learned rules.

Finally, the most widespread difficulty, encountered by about 80% of students, concerns the opposition between the compound perfect and the imperfect. Most limit themselves to the compound perfect to express the past („am făcut" / I did, „am văzut" / I saw) and avoid the imperfect, even when the context explicitly calls for an ongoing action. Questions such as „Ce făceai ieri la ora șase?" (What were you doing yesterday at six o'clock?) often receive answers in the perfect tense: „Am lucrat" (I have worked), which indicates a misunderstanding of aspectual value.

These results, summarized in percentages, confirm what pedagogical observation already suggests: the difficulties are not random but reflect structural features of the Romanian language. They highlight the need for adapted teaching methods that combine theoretical explanation with practical exercises, as well as constant exposure to the living language, so that students can move from abstract understanding to spontaneous and correct mastery of grammatical phenomena.

Beyond merely noting the difficulties, the process of teaching Romanian as a foreign language requires carefully structured pedagogical thinking, combining theoretical rigor with varied and engaging working techniques. Teaching experience confirms that the best results appear when the teacher combines multiple complementary strategies, each targeting a different aspect of learning. A primary pillar is the contrastive method, which involves comparing Romanian rules with those of the learners' native language and highlighting the functional similarities and differences. This approach helps not only in the correct fixation of grammatical phenomena but also in raising awareness of interference that can generate errors.

Equally important is the introduction of functional exercises, in which theoretical structures are practiced in everyday sentences. Short dialogues, practical scenarios, and role-playing games transform learning into a real communicative exercise, allowing the

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student to test their knowledge in contexts close to real-life situations. To support visual memory, the teacher can use comparative tables, colorful diagrams, timelines, and typological classifications—tools that make it easier to perceive complex grammatical relationships.

At the same time, direct exposure to the language through immersion remains an essential catalyst for progress. Listening to authentic materials, from radio recordings to short video reports, combined with spontaneous practice in class and gentle feedback, stimulates confidence and naturalness in expression. Another strategy with significant impact is the error portfolio: each student records their own mistakes and periodically monitors how successfully they correct them. This tool not only turns errors into learning opportunities but also encourages personal responsibility for progress.

Thus, effective teaching methods are not limited to a set of standard exercises but form a collection of flexible practices adapted to the linguistic profile and needs of each learner, capable of transforming the difficulties of the Romanian language into a motivating challenge and an efficient learning experience.

In other words, the present analysis shows that although Romanian relies on a solid internal coherence that fascinates linguists and native speakers alike, for the foreign learner it often reveals itself as a winding terrain, sprinkled with subtle traps. This impression of unpredictability is not the result of a lack of logic but rather of a unique logic that gradually unfolds and requires time to be understood. Precisely for this reason, effective teaching of Romanian involves more than just transmitting grammatical rules: it entails careful adaptation of methods to each student's linguistic profile, selection of work contexts that are authentic and communicative, and valuing the learning process as an active experience in which mistakes become a natural stage of discovery.

In this context, the teacher no longer limits themselves to the role of a mere content transmitter but becomes a true guide, capable of leading the learner through the living structure of the language, helping them decipher grammatical subtleties, and turning difficulties into motivating challenges. The emphasis thus shifts from the accumulation of abstract rules to the development of functional competencies, those practical skills that allow the student to use the language naturally and confidently in real-life contexts. From this perspective, learning Romanian as a foreign language becomes not only a memory exercise but also a complex cultural and intellectual experience that brings the learner closer to a linguistic system fascinating for its vitality and dynamism.

7. Conclusions

The findings presented in this study confirm long-standing pedagogical observations: the challenges encountered by learners of Romanian as a foreign language are neither random nor superficial but stem from inherent structural characteristics of the language. These difficulties necessitate the adoption of tailored teaching approaches that effectively integrate theoretical explanation with practical application, coupled with sustained exposure to authentic language use. Such a combination fosters the learner's progression from an abstract, rule-based understanding to a spontaneous and accurate mastery of Romanian grammatical phenomena.

Teaching Romanian as a foreign language demands a carefully structured pedagogical framework that balances theoretical rigor with diverse, engaging instructional methods. Empirical evidence underscores the effectiveness of employing

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multiple complementary strategies, each addressing different facets of the learning process. Central to this is the contrastive method, which facilitates learners' recognition of similarities and differences between Romanian and their native languages, thereby enhancing both the internalization of grammatical structures and the awareness of potential interference errors.

Equally crucial is the incorporation of functional exercises that contextualize theoretical knowledge within everyday communicative practice. Tools such as short dialogues, practical scenarios, and role-playing exercises transform language learning into authentic communicative experiences. Additionally, visual aids, comparative tables, colourful diagrams, timelines, and typological classifications, support learners' cognitive processing of complex grammatical relationships.

Immersive exposure to the language remains a key catalyst for learner advancement. Engaging with authentic auditory materials and participating in spontaneous classroom interactions, reinforced by constructive feedback, cultivates learners' confidence and naturalness in expression. The implementation of error portfolios further enhances the learning journey by promoting self-monitoring and personal responsibility, thereby converting errors into valuable learning opportunities.

Ultimately, effective pedagogical methods transcend standardized exercises, evolving into flexible, learner-centred practices tailored to individual linguistic profiles and needs. This adaptability transforms the challenges posed by the Romanian language into motivating opportunities for growth. Although Romanian possesses a robust internal coherence admired by linguists and native speakers, it often presents as a complex and nuanced system to foreign learners. This perceived unpredictability is not indicative of illogic but rather reflects a distinct logic that unfolds progressively, necessitating time and guided exploration.

Consequently, the role of the teacher evolves beyond mere content delivery to that of a knowledgeable guide who navigates learners through the living language's intricacies, elucidates subtle grammatical nuances, and redefines difficulties as stimulating challenges. The pedagogical focus shifts from rote memorization of abstract rules to the cultivation of functional competencies, practical abilities that empower learners to use Romanian confidently and naturally in real-life contexts. Viewed through this lens, acquiring Romanian as a foreign language becomes a rich cultural and intellectual endeavour, fostering deeper engagement with a linguistically vibrant and dynamic system.

As Jack C. Richards point out: "*The role of the teacher is not simply to transmit knowledge, but to facilitate learning by guiding students in constructing meaning, fostering communication, and encouraging critical thinking*." (Richars, 2008: 12) Effective language teaching goes beyond the simple transmission of knowledge, emphasizing the teacher's role in actively facilitating learning. This perspective aligns with contemporary pedagogical approaches that prioritize learner engagement, meaningful communication, and the development of critical thinking skills. Such a shift is essential for fostering functional language competencies and supporting students in becoming confident, autonomous users of the language.

In conclusion, learning Romanian as a foreign language involves a unique set of challenges rooted in its complex grammatical structures, irregular verb forms, and subtle aspectual distinctions. These difficulties are compounded by interference from learners' native languages and the often unpredictable nature of linguistic patterns that require time and guided exposure to master. Effective language acquisition, therefore,

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demands pedagogical approaches that go beyond rote memorization, emphasizing adaptive teaching methods, immersive experiences, and functional practice tailored to individual learner profiles. By recognizing and addressing these challenges through a combination of contrastive analysis, authentic communication, and continuous feedback, educators can transform obstacles into opportunities, enabling learners to achieve not only linguistic proficiency but also a deeper cultural and intellectual engagement with the Romanian language.

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