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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Social and Educational Challenges of Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language

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Abstract :
Teaching Romanian as a foreign language poses an eclectic array of challenges generated mainly by the complex social and educational diversity of our learners. We, as teachers, are not afforded the luxury of being simple generators of linguistic information as we are compelled to socially contextualise that information, adapt not only our curriculum, but our personal didactic approaches in order to better fit the intricate backgrounds of our learners. In my didactic activity, at the Department of Applied Modern Languages, I have been repeatedly confronted with many situations and particular cases generated by students who had decided to learn a language (Romanian, more specifically), other than their mother tongue. I had the opportunity to capture and write down various reasons and motivations that could help someone make the decision to start studying Romanian. It should be specified before even embarking on specific considerations, that I have always appreciated any materialized approach in learning new contextualised linguistic, social and cultural skills.

Keywords: *Romanian, foreign language, challenges, linguistics, culture.*

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Introduction

Romanian is a pluricentric European language with a modest global presence but a growing strategic relevance in mobility, research, and regional labour markets. Teaching it to non-native speakers is therefore less a matter of handing over grammatical inventories than of orchestrating social participation: helping adult learners act, be recognised, and be heard in Romanian-speaking spaces. This paper analyses the social and educational challenges of that task by focusing on five interlocking domains: learner diversity, mediation and intercultural competence, language ideologies, digital ecologies, and assessment ethics. Stoian observes that social media has transformed face-to-face communication into online communication mediated by smart devices (Stoian, 2019: 126), and that education functions as a starting engine for the activities that run within each society (Stoian, 2019: 125). Bărbuceanu notes the symbiosis between computer technology and education can no longer be overlooked (Bărbuceanu, 2022: 241-242); moreover, in RFL, teaching must adapt to the requirements of a communicative situation, aligning theoretical elements with specific learner needs (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2022: 135-136). This aligns with the call to incorporate motivational strategies explicitly in teaching so that engagement is durable (Lăpădat and Lăpădat, 2023: 144).

A first premise is that social heterogeneity is not a backdrop but a constitutive condition of learning Romanian today: age, schooling trajectories, literacy histories, religion, migration status, and multilingual repertoires all shape access to grammar, lexis, and discourse. A second premise is that teaching is an act of mediation between texts and people, between languages, and between expectations and realities. The CEFR's recent elaboration of "mediation" as a mode of communication, now detailed with descriptors and illustrative scales legitimises what experienced teachers already do: they enable people to understand one another across linguistic and social difference. Romanian-focused scholarship has expanded that orientation by connecting it to translanguaging and intercultural practice, offering a vocabulary for the work teachers already perform even when institutional documents lag behind.

Working within these premises, the article offers an integrated account of contemporary challenges and workable responses. It argues that (i) learner diversity demands diagnostic attention to prior literacies and language biographies; (ii) intercultural competence must be operationalised as ongoing mediation rather than culture-as-information; (iii) translanguaging practices selectively harnessed can expand learners' semiotic capital; (iv) digital infrastructures reshape participation and therefore require deliberate design for presence, feedback, and community; and (v) assessment should reward intelligibility and sociopragmatic fit rather than unattainable imitation of native models. These claims are framed for concision and transferability so that they can be enacted in varied RFL contexts, irrespective of institutional size or resources.

Learner diversity as the primary pedagogical variable

Diversity is often invoked as an abstract virtue; in RFL it is a stubborn, material reality. Learners may arrive with highly developed academic literacies in languages that use different scripts; others may have interrupted schooling or limited literacy in any language. These differences are not deficits; they are determinants of what counts as accessible input, feasible tasks, and meaningful outcomes. Research on adult L2 classrooms shows that when teachers recognise multiliteracy profiles and design for them, participation and learning increase because learners can engage in meaning-making rather than rehearsing failure. In a translanguaging-aware account of adult education, Wedin and

Berg show how purposeful movement across languages, modalities, and texts sustains engagement and makes room for complex identities in class (Wedin and Berg 2024, 88–90).

Another axis of diversity is motivational ecology. Some learners pursue Romanian for professional licensing, others for family integration, still others for academic mobility. Motivation intersects with social identity and language ideologies: if Romanian is framed as "hard" or marginal, learners may anticipate failure or limited returns. A decade ago, Lemnaru suggested reframing such fatalism by foregrounding attainable, context-bound communicative purposes, arguing for methods "articulated with the cultural dimension" and oriented to practical action rather than stockpiles of grammar (Lemnaru, 2013: 451–454). Paraphrased, her point is that learners invest when they can see a path from classroom utterance to social participation.

A third variable is prior language repertoire. Learners routinely deploy other languages as cognitive tools: to plan, to hypothesise, to check meaning. Prohibiting those resources can silence participation and slow uptake. Plurilingual pedagogies accept that using other languages does not dilute Romanian; it scaffolds Romanian. When this is done judiciously, e.g. allowing rapid L1–L2 meaning checks or small-group problem solving that toggles among languages, the result is more time on task and less communicative avoidance. Empirical work on adult classrooms confirms that translanguaging is most useful when oriented toward producing Romanian-medium output and when learners are coached in "shuttling" between resources toward a public-facing product (Wedin and Berg, 2024: 88–90).

Social positioning also matters. Learners may confront racialisation, religious stereotyping, or precarious work. These realities enter the classroom as anxiety, silence, or urgency, and they shape which genres and registers matter. Here, the teacher's professional role includes ethical attention to identity-safe participation: inviting voice without exposure, protecting dignity during feedback, and legitimising diverse accents. Intercultural communication research in RFL cautions explicitly against treating "culture" as lists of facts; instead, it advocates guiding learners to interpret speech events through both their own and Romanian frames so that mismatches can be anticipated and repaired (Bloju, 2023: 289–291).

Finally, intelligibility is an equity issue. When evaluation indexes learners against native-speaker norms, those who bring different phonotactic habits are systemically penalised. An intelligibility-first stance, prioritising prosody, lexical selection, and interactional repair, better aligns with the communicative demands learners actually face. It also reduces the social costs of accentedness by emphasising mutual responsibility for understanding. In Romanian contexts where exposure to diverse accents is already typical (e.g., international campuses, metropolitan workplaces), normalising intelligibility serves both fairness and authenticity.

Granular profiling is the practical instrument that turns respect for diversity into design. Before instruction begins, teachers can map three dimensions: (a) decoding fluency (handwriting, print literacy, digital navigation), (b) control of morphosyntax in languages the learner already knows, and (c) interactional habits (preference for writing before speaking, tolerance of overlap, expectations around turn-taking). Such profiling is not testing; it is a quick situational analysis that prevents mis-matches between task demands and learner resources.

The same diagnostic spirit applies to pronunciation. Rather than pursuing segmental perfection, RFL classes can target four high-yield features: rhythmic grouping,

prominence, vowel length contrasts, and repair moves. Short activities that foreground chunking and post-hoc reflection ("what made that sentence clear?") produce measurable gains in comprehensibility without shaming accents. This aligns with intelligibility-first approaches and with Romanian settings where accent diversity is already a social fact.

Finally, diversity includes institutional expectations. As internationalisation accelerates, the pressure for rapid certification can compress timelines unrealistically. Teachers can respond by distinguishing seat time from exposure and by advocating contact-rich opportunities beyond class (tandems, moderated forums, purposeful volunteering). Where policies are inflexible, transparency about realistic trajectories protects learners from over-promising and keeps trust intact.

Mediation, interculturality, and language ideologies

The CEFR's 2020 Companion Volume reframed "mediation" as a central mode of communication. Romanian-focused scholarship has deepened that turn by specifying classroom consequences. Huțanu and Jieanu synthesise mediation descriptors with translanguaging practices and argue that teachers should design tasks that require learners to re-express meanings across texts, modalities, and languages, not merely reproduce forms (Huțanu and Jieanu, 2019: 176–180). Paraphrasing their claim: when learners mediate content for someone else, they practise the communicative labour they will need most in real life - selecting, reformulating, and calibrating stance for intelligibility.

Intercultural competence, likewise, becomes actionable when treated as mediated comparison rather than cultural display. Bloju's analysis insists that teaching "through culture" means situating language in social practice and guiding reflection on both target and home cultures so that learners can interpret and be interpreted with fewer misfires (Bloju, 2023: 289–291). Under this view, interculturality is neither folklore nor tolerance; it is a discipline of attention to frames, values, and interactional expectations that vary across communities.

Translanguaging has sometimes been caricatured as permissiveness. Wedin and Berg's adult-education study offers a more precise picture: multilingual practices increase participation when they are purposefully tied to meaning-making and when teachers scaffold shuttling between resources to build Romanian-medium output (Wedin and Berg 2024, 88–90). Paraphrasing their conclusion, translanguaging is a pedagogy of movement, not of retreat: learners traverse language resources to assemble meaning and then return to Romanian to make that meaning public.

De-centring the native-speaker ideology follows from the same logic. If the goal is mediated intelligibility in real interactions, non-native models and teacher voices are not obstacles but assets, attainable, intelligible, and context-relevant. This stance opens space to attend to prosody and discourse management (topic initiation, repair, turn-taking), which predict understanding more than minute segmental accuracy. In practice, that means designing feedback around listener needs and interactional success rather than around abstract imitation of monolingual norms.

Ultimately, mediation reaches beyond language: it is a relational ethic. Teachers in RFL settings often broker access to institutions, services, and public life by helping learners interpret forms, procedures, and expectations. Research in Romanian contexts frames this as professional mediation rather than extracurricular benevolence, urging institutions to acknowledge and support it (Lungoci, 2024: 91–92). Insofar as social inclusion is part of higher education's mission, such recognition is overdue.

Digital ecologies and technology-mediated participation

The digital turn is not a temporary workaround; it is the durable ecology in which much RFL work now unfolds. Online and hybrid formats redistribute affordances and burdens: they extend access across borders while risking thin participation, delayed feedback, and platform fatigue. Evidence from Romanian higher education during and after COVID-19 documents both the fragility and the promise of these environments. Trifan reports that synchronous videoconferencing and asynchronous work demanded new forms of planning and yielded challenges around visibility and workload, while also creating opportunities for mixed-mode continuity (Trifan, 2023: 170–172).

Designing for presence means three things. First, engineer visibility: clear agendas, micro-tasks with deliverables, and recurrent check-ins that make participation legible without surveillance. Second, engineer feedback: short cycles of targeted response using audio or quick text annotations so that distance does not calcify into silence. Third, engineer community: stable small groups, predictable rituals, and channels where learners can ask for help without performative exposure. These moves convert platform heavy-lifting into social scaffolding.

Digital tools also enable richer semiotic repertoires. Screen-sharing, collaborative documents, and mobile voice notes allow teachers to model text-to-speech mediation and learners to rehearse public-facing genres (emails, service requests, brief oral updates) under conditions that resemble their future use. Romanian work on learning technologies recommends integrating, not stacking tools so that effort concentrates on interaction rather than interface; the research-backed guidance is to combine the "best parts" of multiple technologies to serve communicative competence (Pruneanu, 2023: 1450–1451). As Maria-Magdalena Lăpădat reminds us, "digital transformation in language learning is effective only when it enhances meaningful interaction and fosters learner autonomy" (Lăpădat, 2023: 270). This observation aligns closely with RFL teaching, where technology should serve communicative goals rather than dominate them.

Assessment in digital contexts introduces ethical stakes. Remote proctoring can erode trust; conversely, open-resource tasks may better mirror authentic communication, where reference to sources is normal. A considered compromise is performance assessment that asks learners to mediate information for a specific audience under time constraints, evaluated for clarity, adequacy, and stance, criteria that discourage plagiarism and reward intelligibility. Digital equity matters as well: bandwidth, device access, and quiet space are not universal, so institutions should either provide infrastructure or adjust evaluative stakes accordingly.

Finally, teacher workload and boundaries deserve explicit management. The always-on affordances of messaging platforms can dissolve separation between feedback and personal time. Institutions should normalise response windows and provide templated communication in Romanian and a contact language for routine matters. Research in Romanian settings suggests that without such structuring, online teaching "requires more time and effort" from teachers and more isolated work from learners (Trifan, 2023: 170–172).

One persistent worry in online RFL is the erosion of spontaneity. Yet digital environments can be designed to cultivate it differently. Timed voice threads with a single take, or quick "interpret for a peer" tasks using short Romanian clips, create conditions for unrehearsed speech while remaining inclusive to diverse time zones. Collaborative annotation of authentic texts (noticeboard announcements, health information, transport updates) trains the mediation moves learners need outside class.

Digital participation also reconfigures the teacher's voice. Brief screencasts that show drafting and revising a Romanian paragraph make writing processes visible; audio replies to selected submissions humanise distance and model target prosody. Pruneanu's synthesis emphasises precisely this integrative stance: combine tools to serve communicative competence and to increase speaking time, not to showcase platforms (Pruneanu, 2023:1450–1451).

A digitally mature RFL ecology also invites learners to co-design. Opt-in corpora of learner-curated phrases encountered in the wild build a living repository of Romanian in use; rotating curation roles distribute responsibility. Where technical constraints preclude such tooling, low-tech alternatives (photo boards of signs, shared glossaries) preserve the participatory logic.

Assessment, ethics, and the professionalism of mediation

Assessment is where ideologies harden into consequences. If tests valorise error-free morphosyntax detached from meaning, learners who are otherwise communicatively successful will be ranked as failing. Conversely, if assessments value intelligibility, sociopragmatic fit, and strategic competence, they legitimise diverse trajectories toward effective Romanian. Romanian scholarship has begun to articulate this shift, urging evaluation practices that align with CEFR-informed descriptors and that make room for mediation tasks where learners reformulate and explain information for others (Huțanu and Jieanu, 2019: 176–180).

Intercultural ethics should also inform feedback. Bloju's insistence on a reflective, two-sided intercultural stance implies that error correction is never neutral; it positions identities and can wound dignity if it ridicules accents or beliefs (Bloju 2023, 292–294). A professionalism of mediation therefore includes commitments to respectful language about language, to transparency in criteria, and to the normalisation of accent diversity. In multilingual cities, the "unmarked" accent is already plural; assessment should reflect that civic fact.

Professionalism additionally requires a research-engaged stance toward pedagogical choices. Lemnaru's early argument for practical, culturally articulated methods prefigured current calls to ground innovation in evidence rather than fashion (Lemnaru, 2013: 453–455). That stance fits digital ecologies: Pruneanu's synthesis cautions against techno-solutionism and recommends integrating tools to serve communication, not the reverse (Pruneanu, 2023: 1450–1451). Across settings, the professional through-line is the same: make design choices legible to learners, align them with intelligibility, and persist long enough for routines to become culture.

A final ethical dimension concerns institutional recognition of mediation as labour. As Lungoci observes, the teacher's role in Romanian education already includes brokering understanding among stakeholders (students, administrators, colleagues) and across languages; naming this explicitly allows workload calculations, training, and support to be aligned with reality (Lungoci 2024, 91–92). Professional development on mediation, conflict-aware language, plain-language rewriting of bureaucratic text, and strategies for multilingual interaction would align daily practice with the values universities claim to hold (Lungoci, 2024: 91–92).

Conclusion

The social and educational challenges of teaching Romanian as a foreign language are neither defects of the language nor mere obstacles to be neutralised. They

are the contours of the work itself: mediating across diversity, ideologies, and media so that adult learners can act with Romanian in the worlds they inhabit. Research across Romanian and comparative contexts converges on a pragmatic humanism: legitimise learners' repertoires, design for presence, reward intelligibility, and cultivate intercultural reflexivity. None of these moves requires elaborate materials; they require disciplined judgement and institutional backing. With such alignment, RFL classrooms become laboratories of civic inclusion, places where people practise the democratic art of understanding and being understood.

From an institutional perspective, assessment reform endures when it is transparent and auditable. Rubrics that specify what counts as intelligible Romanian in everyday tasks, clarity of reference, appropriate register markers like te/vă, successful repair, help align teacher judgement and learner effort. Public exemplars anchor expectations and reduce the interpretive gap that breeds distrust. In the Romanian literature, mediation-aware descriptors are also advocated for speaking and writing, signalling a shift from imitation to interaction.

Ethically robust assessment also anticipates multilingual realities. Where learners operate in Romanian-English or Romanian-French workplaces, tasks can allow limited, purposeful use of those languages as scaffolds, provided the output is Romanian-forward and interactionally effective. Wedin and Berg's account of shuttling between resources supports this principled flexibility (Wedin and Berg, 2024: 86–88).

Viewed in sum, professionalism in RFL is a disciplined mix of stance and skill: a commitment to humanising, mediation-oriented teaching and a repertoire of techniques that enact it reliably. The goal is not to remove difficulty but to make it productive and socially anchored. When institutions adopt this posture, newcomers gain access to participation and Romanian gains new speakers who can act with the language in public. More broadly, the argument here is minimalist and transferable: focus on intelligibility over imitation, mediation over mere explanation, and participation over performance. These priorities do not require elaborate curricula; they require coherent professional judgement exercised consistently across modalities and under conditions of social complexity. In short, teach for use. Now and next.

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