

## **Neurodidactic approaches in teaching Romanian language to pupils from underprivileged backgrounds. A case study based on the pupils from Gârcini**

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*This study follows up two projects regarding teaching Romanian language at academic level and at gymnasium level. The authors propose a neurodidactic approach to remedial teaching and learning of Romanian language to gymnasium pupils from disadvantaged areas. Such an approach responds to the needs and motivation of the pupils and to (at least) the minimum requirements of the national curriculum. The authors argue that introducing brain-friendly lessons and evaluation techniques throughout the gymnasium years could enhance pupils' results in the Romanian language and literature national examination at the end of the learning cycle.*

*Keywords: remedial teaching, neurodidactics, Romanian language, brain-friendly approach, underprivileged pupils*

### **1. Introduction**

In Gârcini, about 20 km from Braşov, there is the biggest and most homogeneous community of Roma population in Romania. Poor health and living conditions<sup>3</sup> along with the lack of elementary education<sup>4</sup> barely define the difficult background of the pupils who attend the schools nearby. The present paper presents a piece of research on the particular language variety (a combination of Romanian, Hungarian and Romani languages) spoken by the pupils from Gârcini and the difficulties

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<sup>3</sup> The average age of the population is 22 years old, out of which 52.2% under 18, 71% under 30, 4,5% over 60. The village is known for the lack of infrastructure – streets, sewerage and bath within the houses, water supplies- resulting in lack of proper hygiene, overall filth, overcrowded houses, as well as lack of health and reproductive education.

<sup>4</sup> The statistics show poor attendance of school programs, lack of school supplies, the presence of many pupils with special educational needs, and growing educational gaps - 9,2% have no studies, 21,8% graduated only from primary school (4<sup>th</sup> grade), 33,2% graduated only from gymnasium (8<sup>th</sup> grade).

encountered by teachers in finding the best approach to teaching Romanian language and literature at gymnasium level.

This study puts together the results of two projects in an attempt to present an under-researched language variety spoken by a relatively closed and homogeneous community of Roma population in the vicinity of Braşov, to account for the difficulties encountered by the teachers of Romanian language and literature when teaching gymnasium pupils from Gârcini, and to propose an alternative approach to the existing teaching methodology. One of the projects was directed towards the identification of the most suitable methodological intervention for a particular community of pupils from “Victor Jinga” Technological Highschool, in Săcele, Braşov county<sup>5</sup>. The second section of this paper is dedicated to the description of its main findings. The other project was the result of an international research<sup>6</sup> aiming, among others, at providing a guide with neurodidactic tools and methods of teaching host-country language to foreign students. The methodological proposals from section 3 of this article derive from the results of this particular project. The last section presents the discussion, conclusions and limitations of the study.

## **2. The language variety spoken in Roma communities from Romania. A case study**

The language spoken in Gârcini is a vernacular, non-standard variety of language, which represents its speakers’ native variety and it carries a social stigma. This variety functions as a natural language born inside this community (endogenous communication), orally transmitted from generation to generation.

This community cannot be described as a multilingual one because the members do not use alternatively the three languages (Romanian, Hungarian and Romani). It is more likely a phenomenon of language contact (due to geographical factors – border with the Austro-Hungarian empire – and migration) that occurred as a result of the interplay or overlap of the three idioms at various levels. This led to “various processes of reorganization of the structural patterns” (Saramandu and Nevaci 2009, 8) that do not correspond entirely to any of the mentioned languages.

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<sup>5</sup> The project was included in a teacher’s dissertation for obtaining the 1<sup>st</sup> teaching degree by Andreea-Cristina Botiz.

<sup>6</sup> The Erasmus+ funded project entitled “Multimedia Didactics. The Art and Science of Teaching Host Country Language”. More information and the main results are available at [www.teachmeproject.eu](http://www.teachmeproject.eu).

Although at societal level, the community of Gârcini behaves and preserves the traditions of Gypsy/Roma population, their declared ethnicity is mostly Romanian.

The pupils involved in the study belong to this community. They are 5<sup>th</sup> graders at “Victor Jinga” Technological Highschool in Săcele and are taught Romanian as a mother tongue. The research involved observation, recordings, and questionnaires used for gathering some linguistic data as well as a battery of tests meant to identify the level of linguistic competence according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The initial part of the research was addressed to 36 pupils and revealed a few distinctive characteristics of this language variety. These are in contrast with the norms of Romanian language:

i) there are some specific marked affective phrases in greeting formulas:

(1<sup>7</sup>) *Ce faci, to?* (How are you, yo?)

*To, băiată!* (Yo, boyish girl!)

*Du-ti, to!* (Go, yo!)

*Haoleu!* (Ouch!)

*Ciaules!* (Hello!/ Good bye!, after the Italian *Ciao!*)

ii) their jargon is marked by the use of regionalisms (2a), borrowings<sup>8</sup> from Romani, Hungarian (2b), and Turkish (2d), as well as mispronunciations (2e):

(2a) *poacă* (regionalism that means *old lady* or *punch/ misunderstanding/ fight*, but they use it with the meaning of *ankle*),

*chină* (regionalism *tină*, which means *mud*)

*blid* (regional form of Slavic origin for *castron* - *bowl*)

*pcită* (regional form of Moldavian origin, instead of *pâine/pită* - *bread*)

(2b) *fuioc* (instead of *fioc*, Hungarian origin, meaning *drawer*)

*șolomaș* (used to refer to *leurdă* - *wild garlic*, from Hungarian *saloma*)

(2c) *gagiu, gagică* (from the Romani *gaggeo* - *girlfriend/ boyfriend*)

*a hali* (from the Romani *hal* - *to eat*)

*a se pili* (from the Romani *piel* - *to drink*)

*sandilău* (from the Romani *san dilo* - *crazy*)

<sup>7</sup> All examples were rendered as pronounced, since Romanian is mainly a phonetic language. The translations are approximations of the original meaning.

<sup>8</sup> According to Sala (2010).

(2d) *tingir* (word that does not exist in the dictionary, but it surely refers to *tingire*, of Turkish origin, which defines a deep bowl used for food, but which is associated with the pan - *tigaia*)

(2e) *şalată* (incorrect form for *salată* - *salad*)  
*şalopetă* (incorrect form for *salopetă* - *overalls*)

iii) *h* is not pronounced, either in the beginning of the word (3a) or in its middle (3b).

(3a) *aine* (instead of *haine*, Eng. *clothes*)

*ol* (instead of *hol*, Eng. *hall*)

*oață* (instead of *hoăță*, Eng. *thief*),

*otel* (instead of *hotel*)

(3b) *siolog* (instead of *psiholog*, Eng. *psychologist*)

*siologie* (instead of *psihologie*, Eng. *psychology*)

In (3b), the consonant cluster [ps] is reduced to [s].

iv) The incorrect use of diphthongs and triphthongs in speech (4a) and in writing (4b):

(4a) *dauă* (instead of *dau*, Eng. *give*)

*doauă* (instead of *două*, Eng. *two*)

*oauă* (instead of *ouă*, Eng. *eggs*)

*tauletă* (instead of *toaletă*, Eng. *toilet*)

*aier* (instead of *aer*, Eng. *air*)

*cadău* (instead of *cadou*, Eng. *present*)

*veață* (instead of *viață*, Eng. *life*).

(4b) *sore* (instead of *soare*, Eng. *sun*)

*forte* (instead of *foarte*, Eng. *very*)

*omini* (instead of *oameni*, Eng. *people*)

*tote* (instead of *toate*, Eng. *all*)

*pote* (instead of *poate*, Eng. *maybe/can*)

*vostre* (instead of *voastre*, Eng. *your(s)*, pl.)

*frumosă* (instead of *frumoasă*, Eng. *beautiful*)

For *doauă* and *oauă*, the speakers diphthongize the vowel sound in the first syllable. In *to-a-le-tă* there is metathesis (reversal of sounds), in that 'o' in the first syllable shifts places with the 'a' in the second syllable. Moreover, the /o/ turns into a closer vocalic sound, i.e. /u/ => *tu-a-le-tă*.

In writing (4b), the diphthong is reduced with the loss of the vowel, and the semi-vowel becomes full. Sometimes, they use diphthongs instead of vowels: *luor* (instead of *lor*, Eng. *their*), *ierau* (instead of *erau*, Eng. *were*).

v) the use of pronominal forms of Moldavian origin, such as *mini* (instead of *mine*, Eng. *me*), *tini* (instead of *tine*, Eng. *you*).

vi) improper pronunciation of words that contain groups of sounds such as 'ge' and 'gi', through deaffrication (the affricate consonant /dʒ/ is reduced to a palatal consonant /ʒ/):

- (5) *dirijintă* (instead of *dirigintă*, Eng. *class teacher*)  
*merje* (instead of *merge*, Eng. *go, walk*)  
*jem* (instead of *gem*, Eng. *jam*)  
*Ginga* (instead of the proper name *Jinga*)  
*jacă* (instead of *geacă*, Eng. *jacket*),  
*jam, jamul* (instead of *geam, geamul*, Eng. *window, the window*)  
*jemini* (instead of *gemeni*, Eng. *twins*)  
*frijider* (instead of *frigider*, Eng. *refrigerator*),  
*dejet* (instead of *deget*, Eng. *finger*)  
*fuji* (instead of *fugi*, Eng. *run*) etc.

The second part of the research consisted of a regular grammar test followed by a placement test used for Romanian as a foreign language.

36 pupils have responded to 40 multiple-choice questions based on the knowledge of Romanian grammar a pupil entering the 5<sup>th</sup> grade should have: the meaning of a word (1 item), matching a phrase with the appropriate context (8 items), correct word-order (1 item), choosing the correct article, preposition or conjunction (8 items), identifying words from the same grammatical category (2 items), choosing the appropriate noun form (1 item), the appropriate adjective (3 items), verifying various agreement forms (13 items). The test revealed the fact that 78% of the pupils were not able to provide 19 correct answers out of 40. The results also indicated that the pupils were affected by functional illiteracy in their own mother tongue. Such results determined the necessity of a changing perspective. In order to check the linguistic competence of the pupils, a placement test for Romanian as a foreign language was applied. 29 pupils were tested and the results (according to CEFRL) were as follows:

<b>Competence/Level</b>	<b>Unidentified</b>	<b>Pre A1</b>	<b>A1</b>	<b>A2</b>	<b>B1</b>
<i>Listening</i>		2	8	<b>16</b>	3
<i>Reading</i>			<b>16</b>	11	2
<i>Speaking</i>			<b>29</b>		
<i>Writing</i>	6	<b>15</b>	8		
<i>Grammar &amp; Vocabulary</i>		5	<b>13</b>	11	

The level of the class was A1, with slightly higher results for the receptive skills (16 pupils were graded according to A2 level for listening-comprehension and 11 for reading-comprehension). The productive skills were graded as A1 (speaking) and even pre A1 (for writing).

The results indicated that the pupils were unable to understand and respond appropriately to teachers' requests in Romanian and they needed remedial teaching to overcome the gap between the curriculum-based expectations for 5<sup>th</sup> graders and their current abilities.

Such results were consistent with school statistics for the end of the school year 2022-2023: 78,17% from the pupils had more than 20 absences/ month, 23,14% did not pass the school year (the first attempt), 8,24% failed to pass the school year more than once, 42,13% had dropped school during gymnasium/ secondary school, 44,8% graduated from secondary school, 0% passed the National Examination at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Every year, teachers face such negative results, without being able to find proper solutions. Still, one thing was certain: increasing their ability to properly use Romanian as a language of instruction might improve their overall results.

This study proposes a remedial neurodidactic approach to teaching and learning Romanian language in such contexts, in order to respond to the needs and motivation of the pupils and to the minimum requirements of the national curriculum. This approach could enable the pupils to pass the national examination at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade and, consequently, to be able to access high-school education level and have a chance to improve their socio-economic condition.

### **3. In search for a neurodidactic solution**

The national curriculum for teaching Romanian language and literature is designed differently for natives and non-natives. The curriculum for Romanian as a non-

native language cannot be applied in schools from underprivileged areas where the majority of the pupils declare themselves as being Romanian, but are, in fact, functionally illiterate in Romanian.

The challenges of teaching Romanian to pupils coming from disadvantaged areas are numerous. Since there are no studies to describe and explain the linguistic code used in such communities, the curriculum is not adapted to it, as it is, for instance, for the Hungarian community living in Romania. Instead of teaching Romanian according to the national curriculum for natives, teachers should try a remedial second-language approach to teaching Romanian. Moreover, teachers from elementary school and even some secondary school Romanian teachers lack specific training for teaching Romanian as a foreign language. They need to adapt to the social and educational reality of the disadvantaged groups and to find proper solutions to improve their language proficiency.

The neurodidactic approach to teaching proposes several principles meant to stimulate learning from a brain-friendly perspective. Adopting the Triune Brain Principle (routines – emotions – basic reasoning) and the Whole Brain Approach (allowing the interplay with other disciplines for stimulating/empowering the activities of both right and left hemispheres of the brain) allows the development of a balance between thinking, doing, and feeling (the so-called lateralization brain). Another basic neurodidactic principle is that of the Multiple Intelligences that recognizes individual variation in students' intellectual performance and allows attention to be focused on areas that require emphatic operational training.

The essential methodological principles for structuring learning goals, and lessons and for planning exercises and activities (Funk 2014) include: competence orientation, success orientation, action orientation, task orientation, interaction orientation, contextualisation/authenticity, personalisation, learner activation, content orientation, and promotion of learner autonomy.

Both theoretical and methodological principles were taken into consideration in order to advance a few methodological proposals for teachers of Romanian language. Such suggestions can also be adopted by teachers of other school subjects.

### **3.1. Teaching proposals**

The studied community and the age of the pupils (under 12 years old) indicate that they still have the possibility to *acquire* the language (as a mother tongue), but, more importantly, they need *to learn how to learn* (by means of concrete learning situations that trigger active learning processes). Apart from teaching a particular

subject, secondary school teachers should teach pupils how to learn as a lifelong skill. Therefore, *stimulating learning and transferring* the learned content from the sensory register to the short-term memory and, finally, to the long-term memory through repetition and systemizing information is crucial.

Traditionally, such an approach would require pupils to do homework. Yet, their lack of interest and adequate conditions for doing homework do not allow teachers to use homework as a learning strategy. Neurodidactics suggests *using affective factors* (such as emotions towards the teacher and the learned language) to increase pupils' motivation (based on existing social factors and encouraging pupils to capitalize on successful school experiences) and *providing comfort and a secure learning environment* within the school. In fact, the lack of security represents a major stress factor for the members of Gârcini community. Ensuring a safe and positive learning environment is, therefore, essential.

Moreover, *associating learning with a positive climate* (encouraging humour and laughter) helps increase retention and recall, relieving the stress. Teachers are encouraged to use appropriate humour and to temper hostility and aggression. When humour is used, discipline problems are less likely to occur.

Considering their age and very active motor skills, *employing movement in connection to learning* is highly beneficial. In learning a language, this is possible especially in situations in which pupils verbally repeat what they have learned, through role-playing (interviews, simulations), making predictions, instructional games, dances, music, etc.

Other important elements that could be enhanced and oriented towards the learning process are pupils' propensity for visual input and their increased interest in digital technologies. The recommendations include *using multisensory instruction to boost learning* (interesting and colourful visuals, illustrations, cartoons, charts, timelines and graphs, research videos, movies, audio recordings, etc.). Pupils should be also allowed and encouraged to interact with technology through internet exercises on school smart boards or involving pupils in online quiz games. Thus, they will have the chance to make their own quizzes, rehearsing what they have learned in order to create the questions. Such an approach would help both the teacher and the pupils to transform every learning experience into something useful and related with the surrounding reality.

Teachers should provide brain-friendly lessons by taking into account several anchor points (cf. Sousa 2022, 172). For instance, using the board properly and employing a multisensory approach (read, write, draw, act out, and compute) should enhance pupils' attention and result in a better retention of teacher's input. Making use of metaphors and "what-if"-questions enhance meaning and stimulate logical thinking so that pupils would consider all



possibilities for solving problems. Pupils' attitude towards learning can be improved when the teacher encourages punctuality and goal setting. Teaching them how to set study goals for themselves, how to stick to their goals, and reward themselves when they have achieved them boosts pupils' self-confidence. In addition, being allowed to choose (for example, the format of their presentation – doing oral or written reports, presenting in form of a poster or a sketch) should be encouraged in line with the multiple intelligences principle.

Pupils in general and those from disadvantaged areas in particular are confronted with various problems. Therefore, lessons should incorporate hands-on learning and, whenever possible, provide opportunities for experiments. A very useful teaching approach is to encourage and facilitate direct experiences by solving authentic problems and increase their involvement in handling real-world situations. This can be best achieved when teachers allow pupils to pair-work or group-work, while moderating their interaction.

### **3.2. Teaching Romanian as a foreign language to study group**

Remedial teaching of Romanian language and literature to the study group (5<sup>th</sup> graders at “Victor Jinga” Technological Highschool, originating from Gârcini community) was designed as a curriculum for non-natives and will be applied in the next three school years (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade). The teacher will adopt a neurodidactic approach to teaching Romanian (as a foreign language), by adapting the learning goals and the content mainly (but not exclusively) to pupils' language level for each skill, to their cognitive and emotional intelligence, to pupils' motivation, interests and learning styles, and to the primacy-recency effect. Brain-friendly strategies will be included in all three stages of the learning process (teaching-learning-evaluation) in order to ensure coherence and stability.

The main points considered in designing the curriculum were:

- i) teaching together the four competencies involved in communication, giving equal importance to all skills is meant to counteract the fear of writing/ talking (productive skills) over reading/ listening (receptive skills). Establishing meaning with every possible occasion is of utmost importance. Pupils should be able to extract meaning from texts, audio documents, graphics, music activities, etc.
- ii) insisting on coherence and cohesion when teaching discourse skills, especially in writing form and including verbal and nonverbal strategies to enhance strategic communicative behaviour;

- iii) inserting grammar elements in small chunks with increasing difficulty (from A1 to B2 levels). The pupils should be encouraged to record every successful/ correct grammatical utterance. At the same time, giving priority to pupils' communication needs over formal aspects of language should be considered.
- iv) adding socio-pragmatic information whenever possible and contextualizing various discourses in concrete lessons that enhance communication and resemble real life situations;
- v) teaching appropriate intercultural knowledge (behaviours, actions) offering the pupils the opportunity to communicate about their concrete experience with Romanian and encouraging them to talk about Romani culture using Romanian. Experiencing cultural diversity may also increase pupils' (extrinsic) motivation for learning Romanian.
- vi) adapting teaching and testing methods to pupils' sensory preferences will result in increased motivation and attention in the beginning. Starting with the second year of implementation, the testing methods should be gradually adapted to the requirements of the national examinations.

Throughout the language classes, teacher will also have in mind a neurodidactic approach when designing learning tasks<sup>9</sup>. Considering the primacy-recency effect (the time intervals of a learning episode), a learner retains most during the first interval (called *prime-time-1*, i.e. first 20 minutes), (s)he learns least during the middle part of the lesson (called *down-time*), and (s)he remembers second best during the last phase (called *prime-time-2*). According to this effect, teachers should introduce new information during prime-time-1 (Sousa 2022). Including movement and emotions is a must-have in brain-friendly teaching. Therefore, teachers should promote activity-based learning and encourage pupils to work together (in pairs or small groups) to solve real-life tasks. This helps them interact better, actively participate, get emotionally involved in the activity, and socialize better.

In contrast with traditional approaches to teaching that involved more control of the lesson and maintaining the children "in their desks", modern approaches provide a more loose learning environment. This does not mean that pupils are allowed to misbehave during classes. Once they get accustomed to the new approach, they will respond to the teacher's involvement and contribute accordingly. Teacher's control should manifest by always checking the understanding and

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<sup>9</sup> Scripts and activities for each competence and level can be found at:  
<https://www.teachmeproject.eu/neuro-didactic-handbook/>  
<https://www.teachmeproject.eu/activities-and-scripts/>

completion of tasks as well as by always giving constructive feedback as a basis for further development.

#### 4. Instead of conclusions

According to previous research that involved teaching a foreign language in a neurodidactic manner (Moravcová and Maďarová 2016; Hallet *et al.* 2020; Grein *et al.* 2022), a set of expected results can be advanced. For instance, focusing on meaning in teaching-learning-evaluating will increase pupils' ability to grasp and produce appropriate utterances and coherent discourses adapted to a variety of settings. As a result of applying the proposed curriculum and methodology, the pupils are expected to improve their receptive and productive skills as well as their grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competencies. Brain-friendly teaching is expected to increase motivation for learning Romanian and using it to achieve personal and professional goals.

Given the challenging teaching conditions required by the study group (pupil's attendance and their poor learning skills), the estimated time for the implementation of the project is three years. Every six months, tests will be taken to assess pupils' evolution and to adjust the curriculum and teacher's input.

Although limited by its reduced dimensions, we believe that this study can be piloted by teachers who are confronted with similar challenges. Teaching in conformity with the regular curriculum in disadvantaged communities only increases pupils' educational gaps. Empowering teachers with effective tools is essential in remedial teaching.

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