Didactic Approaches to Optimizing Vocabulary Acquisition in Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language (Level A1+)

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Abstract: This study analyzes the effectiveness of teaching strategies applied to vocabulary acquisition by A1+ level learners. **Objectives:** The research focuses on different thematic areas exploring the transition from mechanical memorization to active use of lexicon in real communication contexts. **Prior Work:** The proposed teaching methodology integrates modern techniques such as the Frayer model and semantic mapping, which facilitate conceptual organization and long-term retention. **Approach:** The Frayer model serves as a graphic organizer for conceptual analysis and explicit lexical instruction, grounded in theories of cognitive processing and mental schema. **Results:** The results indicate that assimilation is optimized and allows for the rigorous delimitation of semantic fields through four analytical quadrants, thereby encouraging the learner's autonomy in managing linguistic resources. **Implications:** The research presents the adoption of structured and explicit strategies, the study supports the effectiveness of the Frayer model, semantic map, interactive tasks (role-playing, simulations), which require the active use of learned vocabulary, rigorous contextualization of vocabulary acquisition for Romanian as a foreign language teachers, researchers in the field of foreign language teaching. **Value:** The success of lexical acquisition at the A1+ level depends not only on the rigorous contextualization of terms but also on the learner's ability to mobilize vocabulary autonomously in real-life interactions.

Keywords: Romanian as a foreign language; vocabulary; A1+ level; didactic strategies; Frayer model

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1. Introduction

The expansion of Romanian language teaching as a foreign language at USMF "Nicolae Testemițanu" is directly correlated with the increase in the number of international students, a phenomenon that propels Romanian into the sphere of multilingual and multicultural communication. This increased visibility transforms the teaching process from a purely linguistic endeavor into an essential tool for cultural mediation (Busuioc & Vîntu, 2022).

A major barrier to learning Romanian as a foreign language at the A1+ level is learners' dependence on rote memorization, a process that delays the activation of vocabulary in spontaneous communication.

The study evaluates the effectiveness of explicit teaching strategies in the transition from passive assimilation to active use of vocabulary in real contexts.

This study analyzes the effectiveness of teaching strategies applied in the process of acquiring Romanian vocabulary by foreign students at the A1+ level at USMF "Nicolae Testemițanu", first year, focusing on the fundamental transition from rote memorization to active use of vocabulary in authentic communication contexts. The research is structured around thematic pillars essential for everyday communication—such as time, gastronomy, housing, health, travel experiences, etc.—areas that serve as support for testing accelerated learning methodologies. The education of learners is no longer aimed at storing knowledge, but at activating it. We are moving from memorizing theoretical concepts to applying practical solutions that produce immediate results. Foreign students are not mere beneficiaries, but partners in the educational process. They actively take control of the direction of their learning and are jointly responsible for the quality and efficiency of the results obtained.

2. Literature Review

Based on the conceptual analysis framework originally developed by Frayer, Frederick and Klausmeier (1969), the Frayer model has evolved from a tool for assessing concept mastery to an essential teaching strategy in modern pedagogy. Subsequent studies have shown that this method facilitates deep cognitive processing, transforming linear memorization into structured mental organization, which is crucial for language learners in the transition to active lexical use.

The Frayer model is useful in teaching vocabulary that describes concepts that learners may already be familiar with but cannot yet clearly define. Before reading a text, it is advantageous to familiarize oneself with the key vocabulary terms that will guide the reading and analysis of the text. The use of concept maps has been associated with increased vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, and inferential knowledge (Panjaitan & Sihotang, 2020, p.43).

The implementation of semantic map-type graphic organizers and the Frayer model has demonstrated a significant positive impact on academic performance, according to researchers Cesario and Labajo Jr. (2024), providing learners with a logical framework for organizing ideas. Beyond simple memorization, these graphic organizers stimulated and reinforced long-term information retention by anchoring vocabulary in networks of logical connections. Thus, the strategy proves to be an essential vector not only for science, but also for optimizing language skills in Romanian as a foreign language. Moreover, vocabulary development through this method contributes to increased self-confidence, transforming the incorporation of graphic organizers into a highly effective pedagogical strategy (Cesario & Labajo Jr., 2024, p. 1320).

According to authors Wardarita and Surastina (2024), the Frayer model is a method used for teaching vocabulary, which is essentially a type of graphic organizer that allows learners to separate the different aspects of a word or concept; the teaching-learning process becomes an active one, facilitating not only the deciphering of meaning, but also the extraction of main ideas (Wardarita & Surastina, 2024, p. 2043).

The implementation of the Frayer model (Hulderman, Wageman, Duffield & Nyachwaya, 2025) followed a structured teaching progression, starting with explicit modeling and providing direct support for the construction of extended definitions. The process integrated constant feedback mechanisms and guided relearning sequences, tailored to the individual needs of the learners. After the definition phase, the learners proceeded to identify and record relevant examples, being encouraged to analyze the distinctive features of each concept by contrasting them with previously assimilated notions. The final stage involved customising the graphic organiser by adding examples and non-examples, a process validated by systematic review by the teacher to ensure accuracy of semantic understanding (Hulderman, Wageman, Duffield & Nyachwaya, 2025, p. 9)

3. Structural Vectors in Learning Romanian as a Foreign Language

The learning process is cumulative and builds on existing experience. New information is assimilated by correlating it with what the learner already knows and has experienced, thus giving meaning to the new content. Phonetic, grammatical, or graphic differences generate specific difficulties, so that a pronounced linguistic distance between the two languages entails greater learning effort and additional methodological challenges. A learner's performance increases exponentially when new information is based on a solid foundation of prior knowledge, giving meaning and stability to the new assimilation process.

It is essential to emphasize that the process of acquiring a foreign language is governed by three main axes: linguistic, social, and psychological. These influences define the particularities of teaching Romanian as a foreign language (RFL). Thus, the learner's progress is conditioned by the structural distance between the mother tongue and the target

language, by the phenomenon of linguistic interference, as well as by the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place.

Although they come from diverse linguistic backgrounds (India, Israel, Tunisia, Turkey, etc.), foreign students demonstrate remarkable adaptability to the phonetic system of the Romanian language. Surprisingly, pronunciation is not a major obstacle for international learners. They manage to read texts with ease, pronunciation not constituting a significant barrier in their learning process. This ease suggests a good correlation between the graphic and sound systems of the Romanian language in the students' perception.

The effectiveness of the Romanian language teaching-learning process is directly proportional to the degree to which tasks are adapted to each student's specific profile. By viewing cultural diversity as an asset rather than an impediment, the teacher facilitates a smoother transition to the new language, anchoring new concepts in the realities known to the participants (Jieanu, 2025, p. 49).

The value of a course lies not in the volume of data transmitted, but in the degree of integration of new concepts into practical skills. This conversion takes place by connecting the new to the existing knowledge and testing it through the collective experience of the group. The difficulty of a foreign language's vocabulary is inversely proportional to the number of words similar to the mother tongue. These similarities, resulting from common origins or borrowings, provide essential support for the student. By adapting the approach to the linguistic profile of the learners, the teacher can facilitate memorization through the systematic presentation of analogous lexical units.

Regardless of the language being taught, effective learning lies in applying modern strategies that place learners in real-life situations. Methods such as communicative teaching or content integration have shown that success in acquiring any language depends on three key factors: the authenticity of the message, the relevance of the tasks, and the contextualization of learning. Although emphases may vary, the basic mechanism of foreign language acquisition remains constant globally.

Limiting learning to the formal setting of the classroom tends to make the teacher the sole point of reference for the living language. For this reason, a functional-communicative method that emphasizes spontaneous language use is necessary. The progress of learners is conditioned by the frequency of communication, because the naturalness of language is acquired only by practicing it in various social situations. Success in learning the target language is closely linked to the frequency of authentic interactions, so it is vital that the teaching process simulates everyday contexts that ensure natural expression.

4. Cognitive-Visual Strategies in Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language: The Frayer Model and Semantic Mapping

The proposed methodology integrates explicit instruction of lexical units with modern thinking organization techniques, such as the Frayer model and semantic maps. These tools do not function merely as visual aids, but facilitate deep conceptual structuring, which is essential for long-term retention. By clarifying semantic relationships and nuances of usage, semantic mapping allows foreign learners to move beyond translation, giving them the ability to integrate new words into coherent and contextually appropriate conversational structures.

The emphasis in modern teaching is on transforming the classroom into a lively communication laboratory. Teachers use real-life scenarios (e.g., at a restaurant, planning a vacation, visiting the doctor, means of transportation, etc.) to encourage active use of vocabulary rather than theoretical grammar learning. The implementation of these strategies is based on a logical progression: from modeling by the teacher, to repetition, and finally to working in pairs or small groups. This teaching flow ensures the development of communication skills in a natural and functional way. Cooperative working techniques, in pairs, games, and groups, are essential in this process, providing learners with the space they need to model and experiment with the language in a safe and interactive environment.

The teaching strategy integrates keyword learning with modern graphic tools that optimize students' mental organization. The semantic map and Frayer model function as cognitive organizers that clarify the connections between terms, allowing foreign students to use vocabulary not only grammatically correctly, but also appropriately in social situations. Analysis through the four quadrants specific to the Frayer model encourages conceptual understanding by asking learners to classify the essential attributes of each word. The result is optimized assimilation, which develops linguistic autonomy and the ability to successfully navigate complex interactions.

Frayer model: This is a graphic organizer that divides a sheet into four sections (definition, characteristics, examples, non-examples) with the term in the center.

Semantic map: A network of words related to a central concept (e.g., "hospital" related to "doctor," "prescription," "pain").

Table 1. The Frayer model: The Concept of "Health"

1. Definition	2. Characteristics
The state of the body when everything is working well. You are pain-free and feel full of energy.	• Lack of pain (tooth, nose, heart). • Physical energy. • A balanced lifestyle.
3. Examples	**4. Non-examples**
• Sports and walks on campus. • Healthy food (fruits, vegetables, fish, honey). • Sleep (8 hours a night).	• Fever and chills. • Cough and sore throat. • Excessive sugar consumption.

This graphic organizer helps students rigorously delimit the semantic field and understand the essential attributes of the lexeme.

Table 2. The Frayer model: The Concept of "Hostel"

1. Definition	2. Characteristics
Residential building provided by the university where students live during their studies.	• Shared rooms with other colleagues. • Common areas (kitchen, laundry). • Administration and internal regulations. • Reduced costs.
3. Examples	**4. Non-examples**
• Room 302. • Roommate. • Student card. • Shared kitchen	• A luxury hotel. • A private individual home. • A lecture hall. • Hospital

It is a key word for their daily survival, carrying strong emotional and social connotations.

Table 3. The Frayer model: The Concept of "Vacation"

1. Definition	2. Characteristics
A period of free time when there are no classes or exams. Time for rest and travel.	• Relaxation and free time. • Travel or home visits. • No homework or projects. • Fun with friends
3. Examples	**4. Non-examples**
• Summer / winter vacation. • Trip to the mountains or the sea. • Time spent in your home country. • A free weekend.	• Exam session. • Romanian language course. • Time spent at the library. • A day of intense study.

This model helps students transition from exam stress to relaxation by using vocabulary related to leisure and travel.

Table 4. The Frayer model: The Concept of "Family"

1. Definition	2. Characteristics
A group of people united by ties of blood or love, who support each other.	• Love and protection. • Living (often) together. • Shared traditions and holidays. • Moral and financial support.
3. Examples	**4. Non-examples**
• Mom and Dad. • Brother and Sister. • Grandparents and Cousins. • In-laws (Extended Family).	• Roommates (can be friends, but not family). • Strangers on the street. • University professors. • Apartment owner.

This is a central concept, especially for international students who are homesick.

A Semantic map functions as a "neural network" on paper. It helps students visualize how a central concept branches out into several subcategories (actions, objects, people, states), facilitating memorization through logical associations.

Semantic map: "At the Doctor's." Unlike the Frayer model, the semantic map visualizes the connections between words, facilitating memorization through logical associations.

Semantic map: Hostel.

- People: roommate, administrator, doorman, friend.

- Common spaces: kitchen (office), laundry, bathroom, hallway, stairs.

- Objects in the room: bed, desk, closet, backpack, laptop, refrigerator.

- Actions: to live, to sleep, to cook, to study, to pay.

- Rules: quiet, cleanliness, dormitory card.

Semantic map: Vacation.

- Destinations: mountain, sea, city, native country (home).

- Activities: traveling, visiting, taking pictures, resting, walking.

- Transportation: plane, trolleybus (Public transport pass, student card), bus, taxi.

- Luggage: clothes, passport, ticket, money.

- Time: country (July/August), winter (January), free, no exams.

Semantic map: Family.

- Members: mother, father, brother, sister, grandparents.

- Relationships/Emotions: love, longing (I miss...), help, happiness.

- Events: celebration, meal together, birthday, wedding, church

- Communication: calling (on WhatsApp), talking, sending money, writing.

- Home: home, parents, memories.

Semantic map: At the doctor/hospital. This map is designed to activate basic medical vocabulary through logical associations.

- Symptoms (What do I feel?): fever and chills, cough and sore throat, dizziness or nausea, fatigue (I am tired).

- Parts of the body (Where does it hurt?): head, nose, tooth, heart, stomach, back, hand, foot, throat.

- Personnel and location (Who am I talking to?): doctor/physician and nurse; office or reception; hospital or private clinic, pharmacy (where I go after the consultation).

- Actions and communication (What am I doing?): scheduling a consultation, consulting (the doctor consults me), explaining the problem, paying (if it is a private clinic).

- Treatment (What do I receive?): prescription, pills, cough syrup, vitamins, blood tests, rest, and tea with honey and ginger, garlic.

For example: Student 2 chooses the words "Symptoms," student 1 chooses "Body parts," and they must construct a request at the reception desk: "Hello! I have a headache and a fever. I want an appointment with the doctor."

The semantic map provides the "material" (words), and the Frayer model (which we previously created for "Health") provides the "structure" (definition and context).

How to use the Semantic Map in class:

• Write the central word on the board (e.g., Family) and ask students to say any word that comes to mind. Draw branches as they respond.

• Give them a list of 15 mixed words (e.g., bed, airplane, mother, cook, mountain) and ask them to place them on the appropriate semantic map.

• Ask them to give a short presentation using an entire branch.

For example: "On vacation, I fly to the seaside to relax."

These semantic maps, together with Frayer models, provide students with an unbeatable mental structure for navigating the Romanian language.

The success of a teaching strategy lies in the complementary use of traditional materials and modern technologies. Their effectiveness depends on the teacher's ability to select resources tailored to the specific needs of the target audience, successfully integrating authentic materials into the key stages of the teaching-learning-assessment process. (Vîntu & Busuioc, 2024).

The research highlights the effectiveness of the inductive approach, in which phonetic and grammatical automation mechanisms are organically integrated into role-playing activities and situational simulations. These interactive strategies are fundamental pillars in consolidating language skills for level (A1+). Ultimately, the success of the learning process depends on moving from simply contextualizing vocabulary to the student's ability to autonomously activate these resources in authentic communication contexts. The conclusion indicates that performance at level A1+ does not lie solely in memorization, but in the learner's ability to mobilize vocabulary spontaneously and independently to meet real interaction needs. For level A1+, success is not defined solely by knowledge of words in the

context of the lesson, but by the learner's ability to use them freely and correctly outside the classroom, demonstrating true linguistic autonomy.

The use of vocabulary in new contexts was supported by a step-by-step structuring of comprehension difficulties. This approach guided the transition from the micro-textual level (words and phrases) to the macro level, facilitating the creative use of linguistic units in various circumstances (Busuioc & Vîntu, 2024).

The effectiveness of the teaching approach is confirmed when the learner succeeds in defining key terms through discovery and updating. The ability to deduce or correlate the definitions necessary for assimilating new content demonstrates not only mastery of the subject matter, but also the development of higher-order skills of synthesis, generalization, and autonomy in learning (Cosovan, 2021, p. 51).

The research results indicate that this methodology allows foreign students to use vocabulary not only grammatically correct, but also appropriately in the socio-cultural context. Thus, the study demonstrates that an approach focused on visualizing linguistic relationships transforms vocabulary from an abstract list of terms into a communication tool.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, success in language acquisition at the A1+ level does not lie in the volume of memorized terms, but in the ability to organize vocabulary into coherent structures. Thus, by transforming linguistic material into conceptual maps, the learning process becomes a conscious and strategic act, preparing the learner for complex interactions in the real world. This approach is essential for the development of pragmatic competence, allowing foreign students to use vocabulary that is not only grammatically correct, but also appropriate to the socio-cultural context.

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