



From Norm to Use: Romanian as a Foreign Language in Learner Production

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between linguistic norm and actual language use in learner production of Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL), focusing on recurrent morphosyntactic patterns and deviations from the standard norm. Grounded in a descriptive and normative framework, the research aims to identify the most frequent areas of difficulty encountered by non-native learners and to analyze the extent to which these difficulties reflect interlanguage development rather than random error. The empirical analysis is based on a corpus of written and oral learner data collected from university-level students studying Romanian as a foreign language. The data are examined using qualitative and quantitative methods, including error analysis and contrastive comparison with standard Romanian norms as codified in contemporary reference works. Particular attention is paid to morphosyntactic categories that are known to pose challenges for learners, such as verbal inflection, agreement, pronominal forms, and the use of prepositions. The findings reveal a systematic divergence between prescriptive norms and learner usage, highlighting the role of transfer from the learners' first language(s), overgeneralization of grammatical rules, and incomplete acquisition of inflectional paradigms. Rather than treating learner deviations solely as errors, the study interprets them as indicators of evolving grammatical competence within the interlanguage framework. From a pedagogical perspective, the results underscore the need for a more usage-based and contrastively informed approach to teaching Romanian as a foreign language, one that explicitly addresses areas of persistent difficulty and bridges the gap between normative grammar and communicative practice. By situating learner production at the intersection of norm and use, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of RFL acquisition and offers practical implications for curriculum design, materials development, and teacher training in RFL contexts.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the teaching and learning of Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) has gained increasing academic and institutional visibility, particularly in university contexts marked by linguistic and cultural diversity. International mobility programs, preparatory language courses, and the growing presence of foreign students in Romanian universities have contributed to the expansion of RFL instruction and research. Within this context, the relationship between prescriptive grammatical norms and actual learner production has emerged as a central issue, both theoretically and pedagogically. Romanian is characterized by a rich inflectional morphology, a complex system of agreement, and a highly articulated pronominal inventory. For non-native learners, these features often generate persistent and systematic difficulties, which become visible in morphosyntactic production. Deviations from the standard norm frequently occur even at intermediate levels of proficiency, raising questions about the nature of grammatical competence in RFL learners and the role of normative grammar in foreign language instruction.

Traditional pedagogical approaches have often treated such deviations primarily as errors to be corrected, implicitly measuring learner competence against an idealized native-speaker norm. However, research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has demonstrated that learner language constitutes a rule-governed and evolving system. From this perspective, deviations from the target norm are not random inaccuracies, but reflect stages of grammatical development within the learner's interlanguage.

The present study adopts this framework and investigates morphosyntactic deviations in learner production of Romanian through the analysis of a real corpus. Rather than approaching learner forms exclusively from a prescriptive perspective, the study interprets them as indicators of developmental processes shaped by transfer, overgeneralization, and incomplete acquisition of inflectional paradigms. By situating learner production at the intersection of norm and use, the paper aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of RFL acquisition and to outline pedagogical implications grounded in empirical evidence.

The paper addresses five central questions:

- (1) What types of morphosyntactic difficulties recur systematically in learner production of Romanian?
- (2) How have these difficulties been addressed in previous SLA-oriented and

didactic research?

(3) How can corpus-based analysis contribute to a more accurate description of learner language?

(4) What is novel in the patterns observed in learner production?

(5) What pedagogical directions emerge from these findings?

2. Literature Review (SLA and Didactic Perspective)

The concept of *interlanguage*, introduced by Selinker (1972), has fundamentally reshaped the understanding of learner errors in SLA. Learner language is conceptualized as an autonomous linguistic system, situated between the learner's first language and the target language and governed by its own internal rules. Within this framework, errors are viewed as manifestations of hypothesis testing and rule construction rather than as simple failures. Research in SLA has consistently shown that morphosyntactic development is characterized by processes such as overgeneralization, simplification, and paradigm leveling. Learners tend to rely on frequent and transparent forms, extending them beyond their normative distribution. In languages with rich inflectional morphology, these strategies often lead to the reduction of morphological contrasts and the use of default forms in contexts that require marked distinctions. From a didactic perspective, this reconceptualization has significant implications. Error analysis is no longer limited to identifying deficiencies, but becomes a means of understanding learner cognition and developmental stages. Contemporary pedagogical models emphasize form-focused instruction, contrastive analysis, and usage-based explanations, integrating normative grammar into communicative practice rather than presenting it as an abstract and decontextualized system. In the context of Romanian as a foreign language, empirical research remains relatively limited. Existing studies report persistent difficulties in verbal inflection, agreement, pronominal usage, and prepositional selection. However, many analyses rely on isolated examples or teacher intuition, highlighting the need for corpus-based investigations that systematically relate learner production to both normative descriptions of Romanian and SLA theory.

3. Methodology and Corpus Description

The empirical analysis presented in this study is based on a learner corpus compiled from university-level RFL courses over two academic years. The participants were international students enrolled in preparatory or elective Romanian language courses, with heterogeneous linguistic backgrounds, including Romance, Slavic, Germanic, and non-Indo-European languages.

3.1. Corpus Composition

The corpus consists of approximately forty written texts and twenty oral recordings. The written data include argumentative essays, descriptive compositions, and short written responses produced under both controlled and semi-controlled conditions. The oral data comprise prepared presentations, guided interviews, and spontaneous classroom interactions.

All participants had reached an intermediate level of proficiency (B1–B2), ensuring sufficient exposure to Romanian morphosyntax while still allowing for observable developmental variation. Learner productions were transcribed and anonymized, preserving non-target forms without correction or normalization.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows a mixed-methods approach. First, a qualitative error analysis was conducted to identify recurrent morphosyntactic deviations. Second, a quantitative analysis established frequency patterns across grammatical categories. Third, learner forms were compared contrastively with standard Romanian norms as described in contemporary reference grammars.

Errors were classified according to grammatical domain: verbal morphology, agreement, pronominal forms, and prepositional usage. Particular attention was paid to recurring patterns across learners, as these indicate systematic interlanguage phenomena rather than isolated performance errors.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Verbal Morphology

Verbal morphology represents one of the most consistently problematic domains in learner production. A recurrent difficulty concerns the use of tense in narrative contexts, particularly the alternation between present tense and perfectul compus. Learners frequently produce sentences such as *Ieri mers la bibliotecă și citit pentru examen*, instead of the target-like *Ieri am mers la bibliotecă și am citit pentru examen*. Another frequent pattern involves the use of the auxiliary *a fi* in compound tenses, as in *am fost ajuns în România în septembrie* instead of *am ajuns în România în septembrie*. Such forms suggest partial acquisition of compound tense structures and possible transfer from learners' first languages, where similar constructions may exist.

These deviations reflect reliance on semantically transparent forms and frequency-based generalization. From an SLA perspective, they represent intermediate hypotheses about tense–aspect distinctions rather than random errors.

4.2. Agreement Phenomena

Agreement errors are systematically attested in the corpus, particularly in adjective–noun. Learners frequently produce forms such as *o experiență foarte dificil* instead of *o experiență foarte dificilă*. These examples illustrate competing agreement strategies. In adjective–noun constructions, learners often fail to consistently mark feminine agreement. Such patterns are widely documented in SLA research and indicate gradual acquisition rather than lack of grammatical awareness.

4.3. Pronominal Usage

The Romanian pronominal system constitutes a major source of difficulty for RFL learners, particularly with regard to clitic pronouns. The corpus reveals frequent omission of dative clitics in contexts where they are pragmatically expected, as in *am explicat colegului problema* instead of *i-am explicat colegului problema*. Another recurrent difficulty concerns the positioning of clitics in compound verbal forms, as in *vreau să explic lui profesor* instead of *vreau să-i explic profesorului*. These patterns indicate incomplete acquisition of clitic placement rules and reduced sensitivity to elements with low phonological salience.

4.4. Prepositional Selection

Prepositional usage displays considerable variability. Learners frequently produce semantically motivated but non-target constructions such as *interesat pentru limba română* instead of *interesat de limba română*. These deviations are strongly influenced by transfer from the learners' first languages and reflect meaning-based approximation strategies. Importantly, they are systematic and recurrent, indicating stable interlanguage patterns rather than accidental misuse.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The corpus-based findings highlight the limitations of exclusively prescriptive approaches to RFL instruction. Treating learner deviations solely as errors to be eliminated risks obscuring their developmental value.

A pedagogically informed approach should integrate contrastive explanations between Romanian and learners' first languages, use authentic learner data to raise awareness of recurrent difficulties, combine explicit norm instruction with usage-based practice, and encourage guided reflection on learner errors as learning resources. Such strategies allow normative grammar to be taught in connection with actual use and support more sustainable morphosyntactic development.

6. Conclusion

By analyzing learner production through the lens of a real corpus, this study demonstrates that morphosyntactic deviations in Romanian as a foreign language are systematic, developmentally motivated, and pedagogically meaningful. Learner language emerges as an evolving system situated at the intersection of norm and use.

The findings contribute to SLA-oriented RFL research and support a didactic model that bridges descriptive accuracy with pedagogical relevance. Future research should expand the corpus, include longitudinal data, and further explore the relationship between instructional practices and interlanguage development.

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