Cultural Mediation, Educational Inclusion, and Language Policy in Romanian as a Non-Native Language Instruction in Roma Multilingual School Contexts

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Abstract: This article examines the role of cultural mediation in Romanian as a non-native language instruction within lower secondary education in multilingual Roma school contexts. The study develops a theoretical and policy-oriented framework that integrates perspectives from intercultural pedagogy, sociolinguistics, inclusive education, and language policy. The paper argues that Romanian language instruction for Roma students cannot be reduced to linguistic acquisition, as it involves complex processes of cultural negotiation, identity construction, and educational integration. The article conceptualizes cultural mediation as a central pedagogical and institutional mechanism that supports equitable access to education for Roma learners whose first language is Romani. The discussion emphasizes the intersection between classroom practices and broader educational policies aimed at inclusion, equity, and linguistic diversity. The paper highlights the need for culturally responsive curricula, specialized teacher training, and inclusive language policies that recognize bilingualism as a cognitive and sociocultural resource rather than a deficit. The article contributes to current debates on minority education by proposing a comprehensive model that integrates cultural mediation into Romanian language pedagogy and educational inclusion strategies.

Keywords: cultural mediation; educational inclusion; bilingual education; intercultural pedagogy; Roma education

1. Introduction

Educational systems across Europe increasingly face the challenge of addressing linguistic and cultural diversity within mainstream schooling. Among minority

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populations, Roma communities represent one of the most linguistically and culturally heterogeneous groups, characterized by multilingual practices, strong community-based identity structures, and historically marginalized access to formal education. Within Romanian educational settings, this diversity is particularly visible in schools where a significant proportion of students speak Romani as their first language and Romanian as a language of schooling.

In such contexts, Romanian functions simultaneously as an academic subject, a medium of instruction, and a language of institutional participation. For Roma students, learning Romanian is therefore not merely a linguistic process but a complex socio-cultural transition that involves negotiating between home-based communicative norms and institutional expectations. This transition is frequently accompanied by challenges related to linguistic adaptation, pragmatic competence, and cultural integration within the school environment.

Traditional educational approaches have often framed Roma students' linguistic performance through deficit-oriented perspectives, emphasizing difficulties in Romanian language acquisition while overlooking the sociolinguistic complexity of bilingual environments. However, contemporary research in minority education and inclusive pedagogy highlights the necessity of reinterpreting bilingualism as a valuable educational resource. From this perspective, language learning becomes a process of cultural and identity negotiation rather than simple assimilation into dominant linguistic norms.

Within this theoretical framework, cultural mediation emerges as a central pedagogical and institutional concept. Cultural mediation refers to the interpretative processes through which educators facilitate students' understanding of implicit cultural meanings embedded in language use, institutional communication, and academic discourse. By bridging linguistic and cultural systems, cultural mediation supports equitable participation in educational contexts and contributes to inclusive schooling practices.

This article explores the theoretical foundations of cultural mediation in Romanian as a non-native language instruction in Roma school contexts, with particular attention to its implications for educational policy and inclusion. The discussion integrates insights from intercultural communication theory, sociolinguistic research on bilingualism, and European educational frameworks promoting linguistic diversity and minority inclusion.

2. Roma Education and Linguistic Diversity: Sociopolitical and Educational Contexts

2.1. Roma Communities and Multilingualism

Roma communities across Europe exhibit complex patterns of multilingualism, often involving the coexistence of Romani, national languages, and regional dialects. Romani itself represents a cluster of dialects with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility, reflecting historical migration patterns and cultural adaptation processes. Within Romanian Roma communities, linguistic repertoires typically include Romani as a primary language of family communication and Romanian as a language associated with formal education and public institutions.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, bilingualism in Roma communities frequently reflects functional language distribution. Romani is associated with identity preservation, intra-community communication, and cultural transmission, whereas Romanian is linked to institutional participation, socioeconomic mobility, and educational advancement. This distribution influences students' linguistic attitudes and shapes their engagement with Romanian language learning.

Educational research has demonstrated that students' performance in a second language is strongly influenced by the degree of recognition and valorization of their first language within educational settings. When minority languages are marginalized or excluded from schooling practices, students may experience linguistic insecurity and reduced academic motivation. Conversely, inclusive approaches that acknowledge bilingual identity tend to enhance cognitive development and academic engagement.

2.2. Educational Inequality and Structural Barriers

Roma students continue to face significant educational inequalities across Europe, including limited access to quality schooling, higher dropout rates, and reduced academic achievement. These inequalities are frequently associated with socioeconomic factors, residential segregation, and institutional discrimination. However, linguistic barriers also play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes.

Language of schooling policies often assume monolingual competence in the national language, thereby overlooking the realities of bilingual students. In many cases, Roma students are assessed using linguistic criteria that do not account for

second-language acquisition processes. Such practices may lead to misinterpretation of linguistic difficulties as cognitive or academic deficiencies.

European educational policy documents, including the Council of Europe frameworks on inclusive education, emphasize the necessity of supporting minority students through culturally responsive teaching strategies and recognition of linguistic diversity. Within this policy environment, cultural mediation emerges as a pedagogical approach aligned with broader goals of educational equity and social inclusion.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Mediation

3.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

The concept of intercultural communicative competence, introduced by Byram (1997), provides a fundamental theoretical basis for cultural mediation in language education. Intercultural competence involves the ability to interpret cultural meanings, negotiate differences, and engage in communication across cultural boundaries. It integrates knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness.

In multilingual school contexts, intercultural competence extends beyond foreign language instruction and becomes essential for effective participation in institutional communication. For Roma students learning Romanian, intercultural competence includes understanding academic discourse conventions, institutional communication norms, and sociocultural expectations associated with schooling.

3.2. Sociocultural Theory and Language Learning

Sociocultural theory conceptualizes language learning as a socially mediated process occurring through interaction and participation in cultural practices. According to Vygotskian perspectives, cognitive development is closely linked to social communication and cultural tools, including language. From this viewpoint, language acquisition involves internalizing culturally structured patterns of meaning through guided interaction.

Cultural mediation aligns with sociocultural theory by emphasizing the teacher's role as facilitator of interpretative learning. Teachers provide scaffolding that helps students connect linguistic forms with cultural meanings, thereby supporting the development of higher-level communicative competence.

3.3. Mediation in the Common European Framework of Reference

The Companion Volume of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) introduces mediation as a core language activity. Mediation involves facilitating communication, interpreting meaning, and supporting understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In educational contexts, mediation includes explaining cultural references, rephrasing institutional discourse, and helping learners navigate complex communicative environments.

Applying CEFR mediation concepts to Roma school contexts highlights the importance of recognizing teachers as mediators between institutional educational culture and community-based cultural practices.

4. Cultural Mediation in Romanian Language Instruction

4.1. Romanian as Language of Schooling

Romanian language instruction in Roma-majority schools operates within a specific pedagogical framework in which Romanian functions as both subject and medium of instruction. This dual role intensifies the linguistic and cultural demands placed on students, requiring them to acquire academic vocabulary, discourse structures, and pragmatic norms simultaneously.

Academic Romanian differs significantly from everyday communicative Romanian, particularly in its syntactic complexity, lexical density, and discursive organization. For bilingual Roma students, mastering academic Romanian involves adapting to unfamiliar discourse conventions that reflect institutional knowledge structures.

4.2. Pragmatic and Cultural Dimensions of Classroom Communication

Classroom interaction is governed by culturally defined norms regulating participation, turn-taking, politeness, and teacher-student relationships. In Romanian educational culture, classroom discourse often reflects hierarchical interaction patterns and structured participation rules. These norms may differ from communicative practices prevalent in Roma communities, where oral storytelling traditions and communal conversational patterns play a central role.

Cultural mediation supports students in interpreting these institutional norms, thereby facilitating participation and reducing communicative anxiety. By explicitly

discussing communication expectations, teachers create a supportive learning environment that acknowledges cultural diversity.

4.3. Identity Negotiation and Language Learning

Language learning in minority contexts frequently involves identity negotiation processes. Roma students may perceive Romanian language acquisition as associated with institutional authority and social mobility, while Romani remains connected to cultural belonging and community identity. Educational practices that ignore this dual identity dimension risk generating resistance or disengagement.

Cultural mediation promotes identity-sensitive pedagogy by validating students' bilingual experiences and encouraging reflective exploration of cultural and linguistic diversity.

5. Cultural Mediation and Inclusive Educational Policy

5.1 Inclusive Education as Policy Framework

Inclusive education policies across Europe emphasize equal access to quality education for all students, regardless of linguistic, cultural, or socioeconomic background. Inclusion extends beyond physical integration into mainstream schooling and involves adapting educational practices to diverse learner needs.

In the context of Roma education, inclusion requires recognition of bilingualism and culturally responsive teaching methodologies. Language policy plays a central role in shaping inclusive practices, as it determines the status of minority languages within schooling systems.

5.2. Language Policy and Minority Rights

International frameworks, including UNESCO language policy recommendations and Council of Europe minority education guidelines, emphasize the importance of mother-tongue support and bilingual education. These frameworks highlight the cognitive and cultural benefits of maintaining minority languages alongside national languages.

In Romanian educational policy, initiatives supporting Romani language instruction and intercultural education represent significant steps toward inclusion. However, effective implementation requires integration of these policies into everyday classroom practices through cultural mediation.

5.3. Teacher Training and Institutional Responsibility

Educational inclusion depends largely on teacher preparedness to work in multilingual and multicultural environments. Teachers require specialized training in sociolinguistics, intercultural communication, and inclusive pedagogy. Professional development programs should emphasize strategies for mediating cultural meanings, addressing linguistic diversity, and fostering inclusive classroom climates.

6. Curriculum Development and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Inclusive Romanian language curricula should integrate cultural mediation as a central component of instructional design. This involves selecting teaching materials that reflect diverse cultural experiences and creating learning tasks that encourage intercultural reflection.

Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes student-centered learning, collaborative communication, and recognition of diverse linguistic repertoires. In Roma school contexts, integrating community narratives, oral traditions, and bilingual resources can enhance engagement and academic achievement.

7. Discussion: Cultural Mediation as Educational Equity Strategy

Cultural mediation represents more than a pedagogical technique; it constitutes a structural mechanism supporting educational equity. By addressing linguistic and cultural barriers, mediation contributes to reducing systemic inequalities affecting Roma students.

Furthermore, cultural mediation supports social cohesion by promoting mutual understanding between educational institutions and minority communities. Through culturally responsive language education, schools can function as spaces of intercultural dialogue and social inclusion.

8. Conclusion

Theoretical and policy-oriented analysis demonstrates that Romanian language instruction in Roma multilingual school contexts requires integrating cultural mediation into both classroom practice and educational policy. Language learning in minority settings involves complex processes of cultural interpretation, identity negotiation, and institutional participation.

Recognizing bilingualism as an educational resource and implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies contribute significantly to inclusive education. Cultural mediation provides a framework through which linguistic competence, intercultural understanding, and educational equity can be simultaneously developed.

Future research should further explore the long-term impact of cultural mediation on academic achievement, identity formation, and social integration among Roma students.

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