

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN LEARNING ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A CASE-STUDY ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN STUDENTS' INTERPRETATION OF CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES¹

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Abstract

This study examines how international students of Romanian as a foreign language interpret conversational implicatures, with the aim of assessing their developing pragmatic competence. Although Romanian has gained visibility as a target language for academic mobility, little research has explored how learners navigate its pragmatic norms, particularly those involving indirect meaning. The study adopts a case-study methodology and analyzes learner responses to six Romanian conversational scenarios designed to elicit interpretations of Quantity, Relation, Manner, and politeness-based implicatures, alongside two culturally specific forms frequently encountered in everyday interaction. Data was collected from written interpretations and follow-up clarifications, then qualitatively coded for accuracy, partial accuracy, and misinterpretation. The results show consistent difficulty with indirect refusals, deliberate vagueness, and culturally marked irony, while more straightforward Quantity implicatures were interpreted with relative success. Learners with greater exposure to informal Romanian demonstrated clearer sensitivity to speaker intention. This finding suggests that pragmatic development correlates with contact outside formal instruction. The findings highlight the need for explicit pragmatic teaching in Romanian language education and show how targeted scenario-based tasks can support learners in recognizing implicit meaning. The study contributes empirical evidence to the growing literature on pragmatics in less commonly taught languages and offers pedagogical insights for instructors working with international students.

Keywords: conversational implicature; pragmatic competence; Romanian as a foreign language; intercultural pragmatics; case study; language acquisition.

1. Introduction

The acquisition of pragmatic competence has become a central concern in second-language research, as successful communication depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on the ability to interpret implicit meaning in context. A key component of this

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competence is the interpretation of conversational implicatures, which are inferences drawn from what speakers imply by what they explicitly state, following the Cooperative Principle formulated by Grice (1975). While the study of implicature has been widely developed in languages such as English, Japanese, and Spanish, the pragmatic acquisition of the Romanian language remains underexplored (Cojocaru, 2021), despite growing interest in Romanian as a target language for academic mobility and migration.

Research in second-language pragmatics has shown that learners often struggle with implicatures because their interpretation requires sensitivity to cultural norms, contextual cues, and speaker intention (Taguchi, 2005). These challenges become more pronounced when learners have limited exposure to authentic interaction outside the classroom, which makes it more difficult to improve the listening skills of our students. Among the challenges we can mention students' fear of not understanding the meaning of all the words they hear, their varied levels of background knowledge, as well as the cultural shock they may experience, which often places them in a position where holding attention becomes difficult (Badea & Iridon, 2024). In instructional settings, pragmatic features are often simplified or omitted, reducing opportunities for learners to encounter implicit meaning in natural contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Studies have also demonstrated that L1 pragmatic transfer plays a significant role in shaping learners' interpretations, sometimes facilitating understanding but often leading to misalignment with target-language norms (Kasper & Rose, 2002). For languages with less documented pragmatic conventions, such as Romanian, the risk of misinterpretation is even higher, as learners may rely heavily on their own cultural inferencing strategies.

Romanian presents difficulties due to its indirectness patterns, culturally specific forms of irony, and frequent use of diminutives to signal stance or politeness. These features can easily be misinterpreted by learners without sustained exposure. Existing studies on Romanian as a foreign language have focused predominantly on grammar and vocabulary development, leaving pragmatic interpretation largely unaddressed (Cojocaru, 2021). As a result, there is limited empirical evidence on how international students understand implicature in everyday Romanian communication and how their interpretations reflect broader patterns of pragmatic development.

The present study addresses this gap by analyzing how international learners interpret six Romanian conversational implicatures across different communicative domains. Using a case-study design, it investigates which implicatures are most accessible, which present consistent difficulty, and how learners draw on contextual and cultural knowledge during interpretation. The goal is to provide a nuanced account of pragmatic development in Romanian as a foreign language and to offer pedagogical insights that can support more effective teaching of implicit meaning.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study follows a qualitative case-study design, selected for its ability to capture how learners interpret implicatures in real time and to document the reasoning processes behind their interpretations. Case studies enable fine-grained analysis of individual responses and are appropriate for exploratory research in pragmatics, where meaning depends heavily on contextual inference and culturally shaped expectations (Yin, 2018). This design is consistent with established approaches in L2 pragmatics, which emphasize the importance of detailed, context-sensitive observation when examining learners' inferential processes (Kasper & Dahl, 2008). By using a small set of targeted tasks and analyzing the interpretations produced, the

study offers insight into how international students engage with Romanian pragmatic norms and how accurately they derive implicit meaning in everyday scenarios.

2.2. Participants

Participants were international students enrolled in Romanian as a foreign language at a Romanian university. All were adults who volunteered to participate. Their linguistic backgrounds included English, French, Arabic, Chinese and Turkish, and their Romanian study ranged from three months to two years. Variation in L1 background and proficiency is known to influence pragmatic performance, especially in tasks involving inference and cultural knowledge (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Proficiency levels were assessed through institutional placement tests and ranged from A2 to B2. This diversity provided a meaningful basis for examining cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences in interpreting Romanian implicatures.

2.3. Data Collection

Data was collected through six conversational scenarios constructed to elicit interpretations of Romanian conversational implicatures. Four scenarios targeted standard Gricean categories—Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner (Grice, 1975)—while two additional tasks reflected culturally specific Romanian pragmatic features such as irony expressed through stance and the interpersonal use of diminutives. Each scenario contained a short dialogue followed by an interpretive question asking students to explain the speaker's intended meaning. Learners first submitted written interpretations individually during a supervised session. Optional follow-up interviews were then conducted with consenting participants to clarify ambiguous responses and better understand the inferential paths behind their interpretations. This two-stage method aligns with recommended procedures in pragmatics research, where written tasks provide controlled elicitation and interviews offer insight into reasoning and awareness (Taguchi, 2015). Below is a brief outline of the six case-study scenarios:

Case-study scenario 1: Quantity scenario (underinforming): A student asks a colleague, “Ai reușit să citești tot articolul?” and receives the reply “Am citit câteva pagini.” The implicature suggests partial completion, not full reading.

Case-study scenario 2: Quality scenario (overstatement): A friend reacts to a cold room with “Da, sigur, e ca în Sahara,” signalling irony rather than literal comparison.

Case-study scenario 3: Relation scenario (topic shift): After being asked whether they will attend a meeting, a colleague replies, “Am foarte mult de lucru azi,” implying non-attendance without stating it explicitly.

Case-study scenario 4: Manner scenario (deliberate vagueness): In response to “Cum ți s-a părut examenul?” someone answers “A fost... interesant,” using ambiguity to soften a negative evaluation.

Case-study scenario 1: Culturally specific scenario - irony in everyday politeness: “Ai venit devreme ca de obicei” said to someone consistently late. The meaning depends heavily on Romanian pragmatic norms of teasing and mild irony.

Case-study scenario 1: Culturally specific scenario - diminutives expressing stance: A host saying “Îți fac o cafeluță?” signals hospitality and warmth, not a literal tiny coffee.

These examples were selected to reflect both universal implicature types and culturally embedded Romanian pragmatic cues documented in studies of Eastern European discourse style.

2.4. Analytical Procedure

A qualitative coding framework was applied to classify each interpretation as accurate, partially accurate, or misinterpreted, based on alignment with the intended pragmatic meaning. This coding approach draws on established methods for analyzing learners’ interpretations of implicature (Taguchi, 2005; Taguchi, 2013). Accurate interpretations captured both the literal message and the speaker’s intended meaning. Partially accurate ones identified some contextual cues but misread the pragmatic force. Misinterpretations relied on literal readings or reflected L1 pragmatic transfer—an issue well documented in cross-cultural pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Following coding, thematic analysis identified recurrent patterns, including: preference for literal interpretation even at higher proficiency levels, reliance on L1-based inferencing strategies, sensitivity to marked tone or stance, and frequent uncertainty around Romanian irony and diminutives. Interview data was used to clarify ambiguous cases and confirm the rationale behind learners’ interpretive choices.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the host institution. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of anonymity, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. All data was anonymized during transcription, and no identifying information was retained. Participation had no connection to academic grading or course evaluation.

3. Results

Overall, the results show substantial variation in learners’ ability to interpret conversational implicatures in Romanian. Performance was strongly mediated by cultural familiarity, length of exposure to Romanian outside the classroom, and the degree of similarity between Romanian pragmatic cues and those of the learners’ L1s. Learners interpreted Quantity-based implicatures with the highest accuracy, while culturally marked irony and diminutives generated the most consistent misunderstandings. These findings align with previous evidence that implicature comprehension is sensitive to both linguistic proficiency and sociocultural experience (Taguchi, 2005; Taguchi, 2013).

3.1. Example 1: Quantity-Based Implicature (“underinforming”)

Scenario: When asked, “Ai reușit să citești tot articolul?”, the response “Am citit câteva pagini” implies incomplete task completion, relying on Grice’s Quantity maxim (Grice, 1975).

Students’ interpretations of quantity-based implicatures revealed varying levels of pragmatic accuracy. In the most successful cases, learners produced accurate interpretations

such as “He read only part of the article, not everything,” correctly inferring the implicature that the action was incomplete. Some responses were only partially accurate, for example “He read some pages, maybe he will finish later,” which captured the idea of partial completion but introduced an additional assumption not warranted by the context. Other interpretations reflected a clear misunderstanding of the implicature. For instance, responses such as “He read enough pages to answer the question” suggested that learners interpreted the statement as conveying sufficiency, thereby missing the intended pragmatic meaning. Most learners (approximately two-thirds) correctly identified the implicature of partial completion. Students with English or French L1s recognized the pattern more readily, likely due to exposure to similar indirect expressions in their languages (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Misinterpretations occurred when learners focused on the literal meaning, as opposed to inferential gap. A few interpreted the response as intentionally vague politeness. This suggests emerging difficulty distinguishing informational implicatures from politeness strategies, a pattern also observed in other L2 pragmatics studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

3.2. Example 2: Politeness-Driven Indirect Refusal

Scenario: To the invitation “Vii la ședință?”, the reply “Am foarte mult de lucru azi” implies a refusal without explicit rejection.

Cultural expectations surrounding refusals played a significant role in learners’ pragmatic interpretation. In Romanian workplace and academic contexts, speakers avoid direct refusals, relying on indirect strategies to mitigate a potential threat and maintain harmony. Learners who were unfamiliar with this norm struggled to recognize indirect responses as refusals, interpreting them instead as neutral statements or background information.

Clear patterns of first-language (L1) transfer emerged across learner groups. Arabic-speaking learners tended to interpret the responses accurately, likely because indirect refusal strategies are also common in Arabic pragmatic conventions. Their familiarity with such indirectness appeared to facilitate successful pragmatic inference. In contrast, many Chinese-speaking participants interpreted similar responses as purely descriptive—for example, understanding statements such as “He is busy” as factual information rather than as an implicit refusal. This tendency aligns with documented difficulties among learners whose L1 employs different refusal strategies, particularly in interpreting relevance-based implicatures in a second language (Lee, 2016). Accurate interpretations captured both the workload explanation and the implied decline. Misinterpretations maintained a literal reading, indicating difficulty connecting the relevance cue (Relation maxim) to conversational intention.

3.3. Example 3: Relation Implicature in a Classroom Context

Scenario: Asked whether they will attend a class, a student replies, “Nu știu dacă termin proiectul la timp.”

Students’ ability to track topic relevance: Accurate interpreters recognized the reply as a conditional refusal: attendance depends on project completion. However, some participants treated the statement as irrelevant or off-topic, failing to link the workload to class attendance.

Misalignment between textual cues and intended meaning: Several learners, particularly beginners, interpreted the statement as a request for help with the project. This reflects a documented tendency for L2 learners to overextend cooperative interpretations when discourse markers are ambiguous (Taguchi, 2011).

3.4. Example 4: Manner Implicature (“deliberate vagueness”)

Scenario: In response to “Cum ți s-a părut examenul?”, someone says, “A fost... interesant.”

Learners experienced difficulty interpreting vagueness as a strategic pragmatic choice. In many cases, they assumed that the speaker was truly unsure or intentionally neutral, instead of recognizing vagueness as a device used to soften negative evaluation or criticism. This tendency led to misinterpretations in which learners failed to infer the speaker’s underlying stance, as seen in the examples “He found it interesting” or “He doesn’t want to talk about it”. Only a minority recognized that deliberate vagueness in Romanian may function as polite mitigation. This connects with earlier research showing that non-literal evaluative language is particularly challenging for L2 learners (Schauer, 2009).

3.5. Example 5: Romanian Culturally Marked Implicature (irony/diminutives)

Scenario: “Ai venit devreme ca de obicei” said to a student who is consistently late; or hospitality diminutives like “Îți fac o cafeluță?”

Romanian uses irony and diminutives not only for humor or affection but also for social alignment and stance. Learners with limited cultural exposure often took these phrases literally. Less than one-third correctly identified the ironic rebuke in “Ai venit devreme ca de obicei.”, showing a high misinterpretation rate. Also, we noticed a state of confusion among the participants, triggered by the use of diminutives. Some students expected a physically small coffee. Others interpreted the form as infantilizing or impolite. Students unfamiliar with the pragmatic load of Romanian diminutives tended to interpret affective forms lexically rather than pragmatically. This difficulty aligns with findings that culturally saturated pragmatic markers require prolonged exposure before learners recognize their interactional function (Kecskes, 2014).

3.6. Example 6: Overstatement/Hyperbolic Implicature in Daily Speech

Scenario: “E ca în Sahara aici” said in a cold room.

Students showed a clear tendency to interpret exaggeration in a literal manner rather than as a pragmatic cue. In particular, hyperbolic implicatures were misunderstood by approximately half of the learners, indicating limited sensitivity to non-literal meaning. A common pattern of misinterpretation involved treating exaggerated statements as straightforward factual descriptions. For example, when presented with an utterance such as “The room is hot,” some learners interpreted it literally and inferred meanings such as “Maybe the heating is broken,” instead of recognizing the intended exaggeration or implicature.

A comparison across first-language (L1) groups revealed noticeable differences in pragmatic interpretation. Learners with English and French as their L1 demonstrated greater success in recognizing ironic and hyperbolic meanings. This advantage is likely attributable to their more frequent exposure to hyperbolic expressions and irony in everyday discourse in their native languages, which may facilitate the transfer of pragmatic awareness to the second language. Learners from cultures where irony is less conventional in daily interaction (e.g., Chinese, Turkish) showed more literal interpretations, consistent with cross-cultural irony research (Gibbs & Colston, 2012).

3.7. Cross-Example Patterns

Across all six scenarios, several consistent patterns emerged in learners' interpretation of implicatures. The easiest implicatures for participants to understand were quantity-based implicatures and straightforward relevance implicatures, which tended to rely on relatively transparent contextual cues and predictable conversational expectations. In contrast, the most challenging cases involved Romanian-specific pragmatic phenomena, particularly irony, diminutives, and deliberate vagueness. These implicatures required a deeper awareness of culturally embedded meanings and indirect communicative strategies, which many learners had not yet fully developed.

Learners' level of exposure to the target language played an essential role in pragmatic performance. Those who engaged in daily interaction outside the classroom—such as through living with Romanian-speaking roommates or using Romanian regularly in the workplace—consistently performed better on implicature interpretation tasks. This finding supports previous research emphasizing the importance of authentic input and real-world interaction in the development of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

Successful interpreters across scenarios demonstrated a common set of strategies. They paid close attention to contextual cues, showed sensitivity to speaker intention, and displayed an awareness of politeness conventions and stance markers. They were also able to move beyond strictly literal interpretations and adjust their understanding when the context signaled a non-literal or pragmatic meaning. These strategies reflect cognitive patterns identified in earlier work on L2 pragmatic inference (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2015).

4. Discussion

The results of the study confirm broader findings in L2 pragmatic acquisition: learners' ability to interpret conversational implicatures is shaped by linguistic proficiency, cultural familiarity, and the degree to which L1 pragmatic norms align with those of the target language (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2005). The high accuracy rates for Quantity-based implicatures and the comparatively low performance on culturally marked irony and diminutives reflect a pattern observed across multiple languages, where universal implicature types are learned earlier and more reliably than culture-bound ones (Taguchi, 2013).

Romanian pragmatics presents several characteristics that complicate implicature interpretation for international learners. These include the pervasive use of diminutives to express interpersonal stance, the subtlety of everyday irony, and the preference for indirectness in refusals or criticism. Such norms require sensitivity not only to linguistic form but also to contextual affect, relational positioning, and culturally embedded expectations of politeness. Similar challenges have been documented in languages where stance and relational work are encoded through morpho-pragmatic markers, such as Japanese honorifics or Spanish diminutives (Pizziconi, 2011; García & Placencia, 2011). Romanian fits this pattern: learners often misread diminutives literally and fail to recognize irony as a pragmatic cue rather than a stylistic flourish. The results therefore highlight how cultural knowledge is indispensable for interpreting the full pragmatic force of Romanian speech acts—knowledge that learners typically acquire slowly without sustained immersion.

The data also reinforces the strong effects of L1 pragmatic transfer, especially in scenarios involving indirect refusals and relevance-based implicatures. Arabic-speaking learners outperformed other groups on indirect refusals due to parallel conventions in their L1 cultures—a trend consistent with earlier studies showing that transfer can facilitate

performance when L1 and L2 share pragmatic norms (Al-Khatib, 2006). In contrast, Chinese-speaking learners tended toward literal interpretations, aligning with findings that Mandarin relies less on certain forms of hyperbole or conversational irony in daily interaction (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). These patterns illustrate that pragmatic transfer is not inherently positive or negative; rather, its impact depends on the degree of structural and cultural congruence between the two languages.

Learners with greater exposure to Romanian outside the classroom consistently achieved higher interpretation accuracy, especially for culturally dependent scenarios. This supports prior research indicating that classroom instruction alone, particularly when grammatically oriented, does not provide sufficient pragmatic input (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). Because many Romanian language programs prioritize grammar and vocabulary development, pragmatic learning often occurs incidentally or remains unaddressed. The interviews revealed that learners with Romanian roommates or work interactions encountered irony, diminutives, and indirect criticism more frequently, which accelerated their pragmatic sensitivity.

The findings suggest several pedagogical approaches that could enhance learners' interpretive competence. Studies have shown that direct explanation of implicature types and cultural norms improves comprehension (Tateyama, 2001). Therefore, Romanian instructors could incorporate metapragmatic discussions of irony, stance, and indirectness. Moreover, reflective exercises where learners compare Romanian norms to those of their L1 can help them understand transfer effects and avoid literal readings. The six tasks used in this study function as effective teaching tools. Similar scenarios—drawn from Romanian daily life—can train learners to identify implicit meaning and shift from lexical to inferential processing. Also, classroom activities involving Romanian TV clips, podcasts, or recorded conversations would provide richer pragmatic models, echoing recommendations in L2 pragmatics research (Taguchi, 2015).

The overall pattern aligns with research on other languages showing that implicature comprehension develops gradually and is influenced by both cognitive processing load and sociocultural familiarity. For instance, Taguchi (2005) found that Japanese EFL learners struggle more with irony and indirect refusal than with Quantity implicatures. Roever (2004) similarly reported lower success rates on culturally embedded implicatures among learners of English and German.

Spanish L2 studies also note difficulty with diminutives and socially indexed markers, which parallels the challenges Romanian learners faced in this study (García & Placencia, 2011). These cross-linguistic parallels reinforce the conclusion that Romanian-specific pragmatic norms—while distinctive in form—fit into a broader pattern of late-acquired, high-variability pragmatic features. Taken together, the findings show that while learners can reliably interpret straightforward implicatures, Romanian's culturally grounded pragmatic resources (irony, diminutives, strategic vagueness) require targeted pedagogical intervention and sustained exposure to authentic interaction.

5. Conclusions

This case-study investigation offers a detailed perspective on how international learners interpret conversational implicatures in Romanian, highlighting patterns that might be overlooked in larger quantitative designs. By examining individual reasoning across six scenarios, the study shows how learners draw on linguistic knowledge, cultural familiarity and inferential strategies when attempting to recover implicit meaning. These insights underscore the complexity of Romanian pragmatic acquisition and demonstrate that challenges arise not only from limited proficiency but also from the distinctiveness of Romanian pragmatic norms,

particularly in the use of irony, diminutives and strategic vagueness. The findings carry practical implications for Romanian language pedagogy. Learners benefit from explicit attention to pragmatic meaning and from instructional practices that foreground speaker intention, contextual inference and sociocultural expectations. Integrating scenario-based tasks, metapragmatic reflection and exposure to authentic communicative input can help learners move beyond literal interpretations and develop a more nuanced understanding of how implicit meaning functions in Romanian interaction. Such measures are especially valuable given that classroom instruction often prioritizes grammatical and lexical development, while pragmatic competence develops unevenly without deliberate support. Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was modest, and participants differed considerably in linguistic background and exposure, which restricts generalizability. The study also captures a single moment in learners' development; without longitudinal tracking, it cannot show how interpretive abilities evolve with increased proficiency or immersion. Despite these constraints, the analysis provides a meaningful foundation for future work.

Further research should follow learners over time to trace developmental trajectories and identify which aspects of Romanian pragmatics stabilize early and which require prolonged exposure. Prosody-based implicatures, such as those signaled through intonation or emphasis, also merit closer examination, given their central role in Romanian irony and stance. Finally, expanding the analytical scope to multimodal cues, including gestures and facial expression, would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how learners interpret implicit meaning in real-world interaction.

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