# Romanian as a Foreign Language: Multimodal Approaches

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## Abstract

*The present paper aims to highlight the benefits of using multimodal texts in the educational process, particularly in the context of teaching Romanian as a foreign language. Understanding that we live in a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), where major changes, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity prevail, changing the way we approach content should be a priority for every educator, both in pre-university and university systems. The world is continuously evolving, with technology gradually replacing traditional materials, interactions between nations becoming more intense, migration increasing due to socio-political contexts, and terms like interculturality and multiculturality becoming key in contemporary times. All these factors are decisive for the education system, which must adapt to the new eras we are passing through. Through a theoretical approach, followed by a practical one, this paper seeks to facilitate the understanding of the role and value of multimodal sources, offering concrete examples of their use, especially for teaching Romanian as a foreign language, and for developing all the competencies associated with learning a foreign language. Moreover, it encourages educators to develop the creative potential of their students. The world we live in has become increasingly anchored in the mundane, living in a predominantly horizontal universe. Our additional aim is to motivate the support of the transcendent connection and the imagination that springs from a self-thirsty for goodness and beauty. Society needs an escape from the everyday routine, and the teacher, regardless of the subject or field of study, is the one who can bring about change. And how does this change come about? Through desire, awareness, and application.*

***Key-words:*** *Multimodal texts; Romanian as L2; innovation; multiculturality.*

## 1. Theoretical Background

### 1.1 Multimodal Texts: Overview

As their name suggests, multimodal texts combine several methods of conveying a message in order to create a complex and elaborate framework for meaning-making. Among these, we include:

- „gesture, movement, posture, facial expression,
- images: moving and still, real or drawn,
- sound: spoken words, sound effects and music,
- writing, including font and typography." (Bearne, Wolstencraft 2)

All of these encompass five main semiotic systems that need to be taken into account when designing a comprehensive and effective lesson
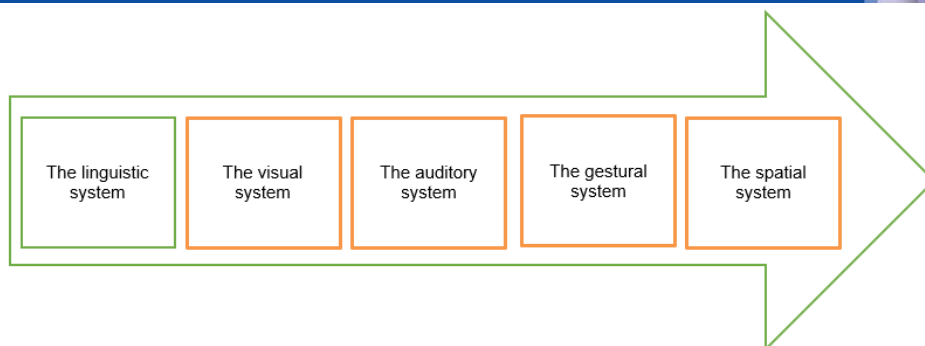
**Fig. 1**. *Semiotic systems*

The **linguistic system** of signs includes vocabulary, the written or verbal organization of discourse, and coherence. All of these are elements that convey meaning and need to be decoded when receiving a message. Being the most accessible to use, most traditional classroom lessons are based on this approach, predominantly verbal, which is not a bad thing, but it is not enough to meet current needs. Thus, the linguistic system must be combined with the other semiotic elements to amplify its potential.

The **visual system** is the second most commonly used medium of communication after the linguistic one and complements it harmoniously. The visual system includes images in all their forms, which involve an analysis of the colors used, perspective, style, and the dimensions chosen to shape the space. And how could this be useful in an educational context? The answer is simple: "The educational task is to build a foundation for lifelong learning inclusive of the arts" (Efland 6), because the arts are not just forms of relaxation and entertainment, but are "active sources of insight, knowledge, or understanding" (Efland 156).

The **auditory system** is another frequently used means of transmitting messages and is based on melody, sound effects, intonation, or volume, all of which contribute to enriching the informational framework. The great merit of the auditory system is its high expressiveness through the activation of deep emotions and feelings.

The **gestural system**, supported by the **spatial one**, complements the other means of message transmission and includes gestures, facial expressions, and, implicitly, spatial placement. In addition to nonverbal and paraverbal language, it brings to the forefront the importance and significance of nonverbal communication, often much more expressive than other systems and means of communication.

### 1.2 Types of Multimodal Texts

The development of contemporary society has brought with it a transformation of the world from unimodal to multimodal, a fact visible both in the physical environment as well as in the virtual one, where changes and innovations occur at an accelerated pace. From the category of these multimodal texts, which combine two or more means of transmitting a message, we mention:

| Multimodal texts | Involved semiotic systems |
| --- | --- |
| ❖  Comic book/graphic novel; | → linguistic, visual |
| ❖  Theater; | → linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural-mimic, spatial |
| ❖  Film; | → linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural-mimic, spatial |

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|---|---|---|
| ❖ Music; | → linguistic, auditory | |
| ❖ Painting; | → visual, spatial | |
| ❖ (Tele)encyclopedia; | → linguistic, visual | |
| ❖ Advertisement; | → linguistic, visual $\pm$ auditory | |
| ❖ Video projections and animations; | → linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural-mimic, spatial | |
| ❖ Tutorial/podcast; | → linguistic, visual, auditory | |
| ❖ Video game; | → linguistic, visual, auditory, spatial | |
| ❖ Multimedia cookbook; | → linguistic, visual | |
| ❖ Digital photo collection; | → linguistic, visual | |
| ❖ Web page etc. | → linguistic, visual, auditory, spatial | |

**Table 1.** *Types of multimodal texts in correlation with the semiotic systems involved*

It is important to note that the semiotic systems listed for each text are indicative, as they may vary from one multimodal text to another, depending on the medium of distribution, its subtype, field, or purpose.

### 1.3 The Advantages of Multimodal Texts

Once familiar with the idea of multimodal texts and their types, all that remains is to explore their advantages and potential in the school/university context, especially in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. Amidst the intense migration from Ukraine and beyond, Romania has recently faced a significant demand for teaching Romanian at levels A1 – A2. However, upon closer examination, it was found that most textbooks facilitating the teaching of Romanian to foreign students are rudimentary in form and content. Against this background, we have realized the importance of introducing multimodal texts or activities based on such texts in teaching and, consequently, in school textbooks to facilitate the understanding and learning of the language, considering five key reasons:

### 1.3.1 Accessibility

Multimodal texts have the advantage of being very accessible, both in terms of content and the way information is approached. When we talk about foreign students, they may find certain theoretical approaches difficult, especially those related to vocabulary or grammar. However, multimodal texts, with the predominance of visual or auditory elements, come to compensate for these shortcomings of traditional texts and transform any material into something accessible and easy to understand. On the other hand, if we think of the culinary field, cookbooks accompanied by images or digital explanations will certainly be perceived as much more useful and easier to use than traditional recipes. As Susan Benedict and Lenore Carlisle say, a book that contains images has the advantage of combining two means – linguistic and visual – that "work interdependently to tell a story" (Benedict, Carlisle 2). Meaning becomes accessible when it finds the right key for reading, and more keys represent more chances of success.

### 1.3.2 Attractiveness

When we think about the field of education and the constant need to engage and stimulate the interest of students, multimodal texts are certainly those that can meet this need. In this context, we can think, for example, of literature. Fewer and fewer young people are drawn to reading, and teachers struggle to find effective methods to spark an appetite for reading. Why is this happening? Because we live in a fast-forward world, where people of all ages want to access information easily and quickly, where time seems to have no patience, and as a result, books with hundreds of pages are losing ground to movies, which present the essence simply and rapidly. However, in this process of digitalization and technological advancement, something is lost. And then the question arises: how can we encourage reading under these conditions?

The answer is simple: by offering students alternative readings, such as comic books or graphic novels. With an attractive design, they manage to capture the interest of people of all ages, compensating for the shortcomings of classical literature. Although pedagogically underestimated, graphic novels prove to be extremely effective in stimulating creativity, enriching vocabulary, developing communication skills, and even practicing grammar rules. The benefits of these texts are also emphasized by Alison Halsall, who stresses that "the graphic novel medium is wonderfully complex and entirely appropriate as a learning tool in the university and college curriculum at all levels of study, both undergraduate and graduate. Among many things, it enables a student and reader to deepen her or his abilities to understand visual codes of rhetoric, the complex codes of narrative and to comprehend how these two levels of reading animate one another" (Halsall 87,88). Additionally, Alison Halsall points out that "This existing intermediality of images and texts also points to the omnipresence of the visual in contemporary culture. In our increasingly visual world, visual literacy and comprehension are crucial parts of communication" (Halsall 88).

Being more attractive than traditional texts because they combine multiple systems of message transmission, comic books and graphic novels represent potential in school and university curricula, especially for foreign students who would otherwise have no access to national literature due to the elevated and specialized language used. With an appealing format and accessible vocabulary, graphic texts can serve as essential resources for learning a foreign language and familiarizing oneself with national literature, the values of a certain culture, and the local literary style. By accessing local literature, students also develop their creativity, their ability to understand written texts, interpret visual elements, and communicate effectively.

### 1.3.3 Enhancing Understanding and Memory

Through multiple means of conveying information, multimodal texts have the advantage of facilitating the understanding of certain content. Researchers have demonstrated that "people process visual content much faster than they process verbal content" (Jaffe, Hurwich 12), which highlights the importance of promoting multimodal texts in the classroom. At all levels of learning, videos, films, and illustrations can be used as useful tools to deepen the content taught, especially when teaching Romanian as a foreign language, where, for example, understanding a written text can be facilitated by the use of visual or graphic elements.

### 1.3.4 Adaptability

Based on the theory of multiple intelligences, we can say that multimodal texts address all types of intelligence, from verbal-linguistic to visual-spatial, kinesthetic, or musical. As such, they are practical tools for the education system, which is faced with the diversity of students. The great advantage of these texts is their wide adaptability to the needs of various groups of people, depending on age, field of study, or personal interests. By combining multiple forms of message transmission, they become engaging and succeed in meeting existing needs across all semiotic levels (linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial). Thus, to maximize the potential of each student, teachers must pay special attention to their learning style and dominant type of intelligence to select the appropriate tasks and evaluation methods.

The goal of teachers should be to highlight students' potential and showcase their abilities through appropriate means, not to limit them through purely linguistic standardization.

### 1.3.5 Amplifying the Creative Potential and Imagination

Last but not least, multimodal texts play a role in stimulating students' creativity and imagination. Beyond the effort to decode the message hidden behind colors or soundtracks, multimodal texts always encode certain meanings that can only be discovered through detailed and in-depth analysis. The charm of this type of text is that information is not obtained instantly but is revealed step by step, depending on the level of interest or education. For example, paintings, graphic novels, theater, and films all convey a central message, but that message can be infinitely enriched depending on the culture of the viewer/reader/listener. There are countless keys to interpretation and possible readings when it comes to the arts, and this is where the limitless potential of multimodal texts lies-in, stimulating critical thinking.

## 2. Concrete Examples of Using Multimodal Resources in Teaching Romanian as L2

Considering all the possibilities offered by multimodal texts and the need for restructuring both the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language and teaching in general, we will propose a few possible activities in which five of the most common multimodal texts can be used: comics, theater, film, music, and painting. In the activity project, we will detail some of these proposals. All suggestions will be tailored to the teaching of foreign students but can easily be adapted for other levels as well.

| MULTIMODAL TEXT | PROPOSALS FOR TEACHING ACTIVITIES |
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| COMICS | **PRE-READING STAGE**<br><br>❖ Development of communication skills in Romanian by imagining the narrative thread of the story based on images, before the actual reading;<br>❖ Creation of a story based on the title of the comic strip and the cover image;<br>❖ Brainstorming about comics read in childhood and possible intercultural discussion regarding graphic novels studied in different countries.<br><br>**ACTUAL READING**<br><br>❖ Role-playing reading to develop pronunciation and fluency;<br>❖ Vocabulary exercises: identifying unknown words, trying to understand the meaning based on context;<br>❖ Predictive readings: after reading a text sequence, students pause and discuss what might happen next.<br><br>**POST-READING STAGE**<br><br>❖ Creative writing exercises by keeping the images and removing the text;<br>❖ Proposal of alternative endings for the comic strip;<br>❖ Enactment of text sequences to develop communication skills and group unity;<br>❖ Project method: creating a promotional poster for the read book, creating a different cover for the comics; |

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| | ❖ Proposal of an interview activity between a reporter and a reader to consolidate knowledge about the question-answer technique. |
| **THEATRE** | ❖ Analysis of Romanian plays (watched with subtitles for better understanding) and discussions on their meanings and main themes. From here, the discussion can shift to Romanian actors to promote national culture. When foreign students come to learn Romanian, we believe it is essential to familiarize them with indigenous values, and this is a suitable way to promote the country; <br> ❖ Observation of excerpts from plays performed by Romanian actors, followed by guided comprehension activities like completing missing words from the actors' lines and answering text-based questions; <br> ❖ Reinterpretation of certain scenes from the watched plays or read excerpts and organization of contests between groups; <br> ❖ Improvisation activities: To develop language skills and imagination, teachers can give students notes with funny terms, and they must improvise some theater scenes based on the words received. This activity also allows for thinking time, constructing lines, writing them down, and short group rehearsals; <br> ❖ Recap moment: Organizing a recap activity where students, instead of reproducing grammar rules, must create a story and a scene to present them. Each student can, for example, play the role of a part of speech/sentence part, presenting its function in a statement before the "king" of the land they inhabit. This engaging activity can motivate them to learn with pleasure and helps them better retain the theory. |
| **FILM** | ❖ Vocabulary-focused lesson: Watching short sequences from Romanian films, followed by a lesson aimed at acquiring vocabulary specific to cinema; <br> ❖ Creative writing activities: following a film sequence and continuing it in a personal style or watching the ending of a film and creating the introductory part; <br> ❖ Project-type activity: creating a book trailer in teams after reading comic strips or short Romanian stories accessible in language. This allows students to practice vocabulary, develop creativity, and consolidate the knowledge acquired during reading hours; <br> ❖ Critical thinking development: after watching all the book trailers, students must provide each other with suggestions, specifying positive aspects and negative points. Thus, they manage to communicate in Romanian and interact effectively with each other. Additionally, during the viewing of their colleagues' projects, students are encouraged to note grammatical errors they identify and correct them at the end. Since these are foreign students, it's natural for them to make speaking mistakes, which is why it is very effective for them to actively listen and identify others' mistakes for future correction; <br> ❖ City exploration and film creation: To encourage students to better discover the Romanian city they are studying in, the teacher can give them a map of that city, with a series of marked objectives, and the students must traverse the entire route, taking photos, which they can transform into a short video with brief impressions like a travel journal. |

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| **MUSIC** | ❖ Intercultural discussions about the music specific to all the countries of which the foreign students are part, and listening to musical pieces for enjoyment. This will help students get to know each other better, learn new things, overcome inhibition regarding communication in Romanian, and ultimately better understand Romanian musical culture; <br> ❖ Familiarization of students with Romanian poetry through songs composed based on verses of Romanian poets; <br> ❖ Guided lessons to understand the message conveyed by certain songs in Romanian by completing missing words. This lesson also aligns well with promoting national values, such as the anthem; <br> ❖ An informal karaoke hour: with the lyrics in front of them, students must reinterpret the song. This activity will help them improve their pronunciation, learn certain Romanian songs better, develop their vocabulary, and, last but not least, enhance their well-being. The teacher should encourage students to step out of their comfort zone and always strive to strengthen relationships among them for better collaboration; <br> ❖ Based on the already known vocabulary, students must compose short songs or poems that talented classmates can put to rhythm. |
| **PAINTING** | ❖ Activities to develop communication skills in Romanian by describing/comparing paintings made by Romanian artists to promote national culture; <br> ❖ Virtual visits to art museums in the country, associated with role-playing games: each student can take on the role of a museum guide, telling their colleagues about the paintings observed, Romanian painters, the history of the museum. This activity should be preceded by a brief documentation that can be done in class. The teacher can hand students a sheet with details about the galleries to be visited, and they, besides reading and identifying unknown words, learn to summarize information; <br> ❖ A moment of creative writing based on illustrations/photos/paintings. The activity particularly focuses on writing nature descriptions or portrait descriptions, from which discussions about family, best friends, and creating a self-portrait can arise. This activity also aligns well with writing narrative texts when the painting allows it or writing functional texts, such as letters, where students must imagine they are addressing a letter to the person outlined in the exhibited painting; <br> ❖ An engaging game organized to recap vocabulary notions: the teacher prepares some notes with terms learned during the classes, students draw notes and draw the term on the board, while the classmates must guess. For this game, it is necessary to impose a time limit for guessing the term and a number of rounds to establish the final score. During the game, students recall words from fundamental vocabulary and simultaneously interact constructively with each other; <br> ❖ Project-type activities to familiarize foreign students with national painters: each student must choose a painter from a list provided by the teacher, freely present a few facts about him/her based on their research, and select 2-3 paintings to discuss. |

**Table 2.** *Proposal for teaching activities with the use of multimodal texts*

These are just a few indicative activities that can be carried out during class hours to develop all the competencies associated with learning the Romanian language. Through all these, we aimed to emphasize the positive impact that multimodal texts can have on conducting courses, by replacing traditional activities with participatory ones, whose main goal is not only learning but also collaboration, developing the creative side, and creating a state of well-being.

### 3. Final Remarks

Considering all the aspects presented throughout this work, we can only re-emphasize the fact that education needs to align teaching methods with the standards imposed by the new society. Multimodal texts facilitate the acquisition of information while also allowing for an intercultural and participatory approach.

In particular, in the context of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, there is a need to combine the exposure of content with the promotion of national culture and local values, as courses should not just be a sum of knowledge, but a careful guidance on the path to understanding oneself and others. A language cannot be learned outside of context, and context entails interaction, exploration, and deepening, all of which are formed during class hours. Thus, multimodal texts become steps in improving the teaching process. They do not represent ideal materials, nor are they indispensable tools, but they are the "instruments" that any teacher should use for added interaction in the classroom.

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