

GAMES AS A GATEWAY TO ROMANIAN: BOARD GAMES AND ONLINE ACTIVITIES FOR EXPLORING ROMANIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE



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Abstract: This article explores the use of board and digital games as tools for teaching Romanian as a foreign language in non-formal educational contexts. Drawing on both theoretical insights and practical implementation, the study involved over 500 participants from diverse age groups (4 to 78 years old), including children, teenagers, university students, and seniors. Participants engaged with six different games—ranging from physical matching cards and traditional board games to digital platforms such as Wordwall and Kahoot—designed to promote reading skills, vocabulary acquisition, intercultural awareness, and stimulate motivation for learning. The games specifically targeted key phonological and lexical features of Romanian, such as the unique letters (ă, â, ș, ț) and common digraphs (ce/ci, che/chi, ghe/ghi). Through intercomprehension strategies, learners made cross-linguistic connections between Romanian and Slovene (e.g., ceai/čaj, suncă/šunka), recognizing shared etymologies and phonetic patterns. Over short sessions (~30 minutes), learners successfully acquired over 50 Romanian words and reported increased interest in pursuing further language study. We expected that the learners would prefer digital tools. Surprisingly, many participants—particularly children accustomed to mobile phones—chose physical games when offered. This preference may reflect school policies restricting device use or the intrinsic appeal of tactile, collaborative play. Overall, the results affirm that both board and online games foster learner engagement, reduce language anxiety, and support vocabulary retention across age groups. Moreover, the activities created inclusive, playful spaces aligned with CEFR's action-oriented approach, where spontaneous interaction and communicative practice emerged naturally. Game-based learning thus proves a valuable method for introducing lesser-taught languages like Romanian, offering learners both linguistic and cultural entry points in a motivating, low-stress environment.

Keywords: linguistic games, Romanian as a foreign language, Slovenia, European Researchers' Night

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the integration of educational games into foreign language teaching has gained increasing recognition as a dynamic and student-centered pedagogical strategy. Rooted in the principles of active learning and intrinsic motivation, games have proven to enhance linguistic competence while

simultaneously promoting psychological comfort, social interaction, and cognitive development (Melgani 2016). When embedded thoughtfully into the learning environment, games not only provide joy and amusement but also stimulate meaningful engagement, cooperation, and problem-solving skills essential for modern learners navigating multilingual contexts.

The use of games in language classrooms helps counterbalance the often rigid and artificial nature of formal instruction. As several scholars have observed, traditional language classrooms may frequently resemble industrialized systems—rigid, standardized, and demotivating—especially for learners with limited linguistic background or exposure (Ushioda 2011). Educational games, however, reintroduce spontaneity, interaction, and competition in ways that encourage students to take risks, participate actively, and learn both individually and collaboratively. This approach is especially valuable when teaching less commonly taught languages, such as Romanian, where emotional engagement and motivation can significantly influence learner retention and success.

The conceptual framework of game-based learning is grounded in classical and contemporary game theory. Huizinga (1949) famously defined games as voluntary activities governed by rules, existing within a specific time and space, and pursued for their intrinsic pleasure. Caillois (1994) further distinguished games through six defining features—freedom, separation, uncertainty, unproductiveness, rules, and make-believe—and proposed a taxonomy that includes agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (imitation), and ilinx (vertigo). Suits (1978) emphasized that games require the voluntary acceptance of constraints, which paradoxically create meaning through the pursuit of goals under self-imposed limitations. These theoretical foundations are particularly relevant in educational contexts, where designing meaningful learning experiences depends on balancing structure, creativity, and learner autonomy.

In foreign language education, vocabulary acquisition remains a central yet challenging task, especially for beginners. Research suggests that playful activities can serve as effective vocabulary-building strategies by creating emotional and cognitive associations that enhance retention (Clark et al. 2016; Schell 2020). In this respect, games offer more than entertainment—they serve as multimodal tools for scaffolding comprehension, pronunciation, and cultural understanding. Moreover, when designed to incorporate elements of intercomprehension (e.g., leveraging lexical similarities between Romanian and Slovene), games can make language learning more accessible and less intimidating, particularly for beginner learners.

Despite their pedagogical value, not all games are equally effective. As Burgun (2013) warns, games that rely too heavily on either chance or skill can alienate students, either by removing a sense of agency or by reinforcing existing disparities in proficiency. For this reason, game design must carefully balance challenge,

accessibility, and meaningful interaction to ensure that all learners—regardless of their starting point—feel empowered to participate and succeed. In language instruction, this means selecting or designing games where player decisions matter, feedback is immediate, and the learning experience is both inclusive and enjoyable.

This article explores the development and application of a suite of board and digital games designed to support the acquisition of Romanian as a foreign language, particularly among Slovene-speaking learners. Implemented as part of the European project European Researchers' Night – Humanities, That's You! (Noč raziskovalcev – Humanistika, tso si ti!), these activities sought not only to teach linguistic elements but also to foster cultural awareness and metalinguistic reflection. Through a combination of lexical intercomprehension, pronunciation practice, and playful interaction, the project demonstrates how games can serve as a gateway to learning Romanian in a way that is engaging, effective, and learner-centered.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Educational Games in Language Learning. Definitions and Components

Educational games have become a central component in contemporary foreign language pedagogy due to their ability to promote interaction, reduce anxiety, and increase learner engagement (Ibrahim 2017). Games, whether physical or digital, are now recognized as valuable instructional tools capable of enhancing vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and communicative competence in a dynamic and enjoyable environment (Wong Yunus 2021).

Research emphasizes that educators must thoughtfully select, plan, and integrate games into their language lessons, aligning them with curricular goals, textbook content, and students' developmental levels (Mubaslat 2012). Without careful integration, games run the risk of being perceived as peripheral or superficial activities rather than strategic tools for deeper linguistic engagement.

The term educational game lacks a universally agreed-upon definition, but scholars agree on key characteristics. According to Mubaslat (2012), educational games are structured activities led by a facilitator (teacher or supervisor), tailored to learners' ages, abilities, and learning objectives. Dempsey et al. (1993–94) define games as explicit instructional frameworks involving rules and competition.

An effective educational game should contain six core components (Syukroni 2020): learning goal – aligned with educational outcomes (e.g., vocabulary, grammar); rules – which guide behavior and define boundaries; competition – either against peers, oneself, or a system; challenge – appropriate cognitive difficulty beyond

current levels; imagination – to foster intrinsic motivation and engagement; enjoyment – to sustain interest and reduce learning anxiety.

2.2.Games and Motivation

Numerous studies confirm that the use of game elements in non-game contexts increases both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Šifrar 2023). Intrinsic motivation arises from learners' personal satisfaction, curiosity, and interest in progress; extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is triggered by external rewards like scores or recognition.

In language education, the use of games within the language classes helps learners overcome the fear of failure, particularly in speaking tasks. The game environment shifts focus from perfection to communication, allowing students to experiment with language and recover from mistakes without judgment (Silva 2008).

2.3.Physical vs. Online Games in Language Education

Board games have demonstrated effectiveness in improving vocabulary retention, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation (Wong Yunus 2021). They provide tactile interaction, real-time social communication, and foster group dynamics in face-to-face classroom contexts. Moreover, physical games encourage spontaneous speech, collaboration, and a playful, low-anxiety atmosphere.

Digital games offer additional advantages such as adaptivity, instant feedback, and remote accessibility. Platforms like Wordwall or other gamified applications (e.g., Kahoot, Quizizz) allow learners to proceed at their own pace, receive immediate corrective input, and practice autonomously (Yousef, Abuhmaid 2023). Online games are especially useful/ helpful for grammar and vocabulary acquisition and can support asynchronous learning, offering opportunities beyond the classroom setting. They also contribute to digital literacy and independent learning strategies.

Despite their differences, blending both formats in a Romanian language curriculum can maximize learning: physical games promote group cohesion and communication, while digital games support individualized practice and motivation.

2.4.Pedagogical Benefits of Games in Teaching Romanian

Although most research has focused on English, Spanish, or French as foreign languages, the pedagogical implications apply to Romanian as well. Games can: facilitate lexical and syntactic acquisition through context-rich, repetitive exposure; support cultural immersion by embedding Romanian customs, idioms, and history in gameplay; foster speaking fluency and reduce anxiety by encouraging low-pressure

oral interaction; enable formative assessment through in-game performance without formal testing stress.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2001, CEFR Companion Volume 2020) encourages an action-oriented approach, where learners are seen as *social agents* engaged in meaningful tasks. Games naturally align with this perspective by involving learners in authentic, goal-oriented language use.

3. The Use of Educational Games in the Promotion of the Romanian Language in Slovenia: A Case Study within the European Researchers' Night Project

In recent years, artificial intelligence has sparked both high expectations and widespread enthusiasm. However, these optimistic views have increasingly been tempered by concern and even apprehension. Given the rapid pace and complexity of AI developments, researchers across disciplines are now called upon to interpret and explain these changes to the broader public—particularly to younger generations, who may be both the most vulnerable and the most responsive.

The project European Researchers' Night – Humanities, That's You! (2024–2025) focused on the highly relevant theme of *Human and AI* (Evropske noči raziskovalcev – Humanistika, to si ti! Človek AI). It was hosted by the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and supported by nine other faculties and academies of the University of Ljubljana, along with the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) and the Educational Research Institute. The project explored the role of the humanities in a digitally and technologically transformed society. Bringing together researchers, theorists, and artists, the 2024–2025 edition examined the intersection of science, technology, and the arts to reflect on what defines humanity in today's information and consumer-driven age. Aimed at both academic and general audiences, the project engaged participants of all ages. To increase the visibility and accessibility of scientific work, the program offered a wide array of free public activities, such as workshops, lectures, roundtables, exhibitions, films, and interactive presentations—designed both to engage the public and to support researchers in their professional development.

The Romanian Language Lectorship at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, contributed to the European Researchers' Night broader initiative with the sub-project titled: Games for Learning Romanian: Interactive Board Games vs. Online Games (*Igre za učenje romunščine: Interaktivne družabne igre proti spletnim igram*).

This sub-project investigated the pedagogical potential of language games, with the goal of increasing student participation, reducing learning anxiety, and facilitating the acquisition of Romanian as a foreign language. Within this framework,

the Romanian Language Lectorship developed both physical and digital games, which were integrated into an introductory Romanian language and culture course/ workshop. The main objectives were to familiarize participants with the Romanian alphabet, to introduce basic reading skills, and to support the intercomprehension of approximately 100 basic Romanian words.

This initiative contributed to the promotion of the Romanian language in Slovenia across multiple educational levels—from kindergarten to university—as well as among adult learners.

As part of the project, six games were created: four physical board games and two online versions, which digitally replicated the physical games. We used these games in the workshop *Igranje in učenje romunščine (Playing and Learning Romanian)*, conducted between September 2024 and October 2025 in various Slovenian institutions: Najdihojca Kindergarten – 36 participants; Podgrad Primary School, Ilirska Bistrica – 78 participants; Hinko Smrekar Primary School – 16 participants; Jože Moškrič Primary School, Ljubljana – 47 participants; ZLET 2025 Scout Camp (organized by the Scout Association of Slovenia) – 100 participants.

Additionally, the games were presented at the main public events of the European Researchers' Night – Humanities, That's You!, held in September 2024 and 2025 at the Rog Cultural Center in Ljubljana, attracting an estimated total of 500 visitors.

These activities successfully combined educational innovation, language promotion, and public outreach, highlighting the continuing relevance of the humanities and language education in today's digitally mediated world

4. Methodology and Participants

This study used a mixed-methods exploratory design, combining qualitative and quantitative tools to examine the pedagogical value of physical and digital games in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. The study examined how participants from different age groups and learning environments approached reading in Romanian, built vocabulary, stayed motivated, and connected with cultural aspects of the language.

The study involved a total of 642 individual participants, ranging in age from 4 to 78 years old, drawn from diverse educational contexts and informal learning environments. Participants engaged voluntarily in one or more game-based activities between September 2024 and October 2025, with data collected during workshops, school lessons, scout activities, and public science events.

The research involved a wide range of participants engaging with both physical and digital game formats designed for learning the Romanian language and culture. Participants interacted with all six physical and digital game formats tailored to

different learning needs and contexts. For the youngest group—36 kindergarten children aged 4 to 6—we used physical matching games to introduce basic Romanian vocabulary in a playful and developmentally appropriate way. The board game *Ludo* was played by 71 participants of different ages, offering opportunities for interaction, turn-taking, and culturally contextualized vocabulary practice.

Digital tools also played a central role. The Wordwall platform, featuring online quizzes and matching exercises, received 24 individual responses, in addition to being used in group settings during workshops—reaching approximately 82 learners in total. Kahoot, an interactive quiz platform, was used 35 times, often in collaborative group formats that encouraged discussion and spontaneous language production. Finally, Romania – Crossword Puzzle, focusing on Romanian language and cultural content, was completed 262 times, demonstrating high engagement across age groups and suggesting strong interest in problem-solving tasks embedded with linguistic and cultural challenges. The most successful game was the Card-Based Matching Game, played by almost all the participants.

In most cases, participants were given the option to choose between the physical and digital versions of the same game. In others, they engaged with both formats sequentially, allowing for a comparative perspective on engagement and effectiveness. This dual-mode approach allowed for a comparative understanding of user preferences and learning outcomes across different media.

5. Cross-Linguistic Comparison of Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondences in Romanian and Slovene

In order to understand why participants in the Romanian language workshops are able to learn how to read in Romanian in less than thirty minutes, it is essential to present a comparative overview of the Slovene and Romanian alphabets, together with the phonetic values of their letters. This comparison reveals that, with the exception of the sound /dʒ/, all Romanian phonemes have equivalents in Slovene; what differs is primarily the graphic representation of these sounds.

The Slovene alphabet consists of 25 letters. Encyclopedic references—such as the *Slovenski pravopis* (2001) and the *Leksikon SOVA* (2006)—list the alphabet as follows:

a, b, c, č, č, d, đ, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, š, t, u, v, w, x, y, z, ž. The alphabet includes five vowel letters (a, e, i, o, u) and twenty consonant letters. Although the Romanian alphabet contains six additional letters, all Romanian phonemes have equivalents in the Slovenian language.

The main graphic (orthographic) differences between Romanian and Slovenian are observed/appear in the following correspondences: c/k (e.g., *coș*/*koš*),

ce, ci/ č (e.g., *ceai/ čaj*), **che, chi/ k** (e.g., *chioșc/ kiosk*), **j/ ž** (e.g., *jurnal/ žurnal*), **ș/ š** (e.g., *șal/ šal*), **ț/ c** (e.g., *țar/ car*). Although the Romanian letters **ă** and **â** do not have direct counterparts in the Slovenian alphabet, the phonemes they represent—/ə/ and /i/, respectively—do appear in Slovenian phonology. For instance: **ă** corresponds to the mid-central vowel /ə/ as in *șel*, **î** corresponds to the close central unrounded vowel /i/ as in *trg*.

Romanian			Slovenian		
LETTER	IPA	EXAMPLES	LETTER	IPA	EXAMPLES
Aa	/a/	<i>mamă</i>	À, a	/a/	<i>Mama</i>
Ăă	/ə/	<i>măr</i>	-	-	(<i>sem</i>)
Ââ	/i/	<i>târg</i>	-	-	(<i>trg</i>)
Bb	/b/	<i>bluză</i>	Β, b	/b/	(<i>bluză</i>)
-	-	(<i>ceai</i>)	Č, č	/tʃ/	<i>čaj, (čas)</i>
Cc	/k//tʃ/	<i>cocos, ceas, chioșc</i>	Ҫ, c	/ts/	<i>Car</i>
Dd	/d/	<i>director</i>	Ɖ, d	/d/	<i>Direktor</i>
Ee	/e//je/, /iɛ/	<i>Europa</i>	Ӗ, e	/ɛ/, /e/, /ə/	<i>Europa</i>
Ff	/f/	<i>frizer</i>	Ӗ, f	/f/	<i>Frizer</i>
Gg	/g//dʒ/	<i>groaznic, ghepard, girafă</i>	Ԍ, g	/g/	<i>grozno, gepard, (žirafa)</i>
Hh	/h/ ([h], [ç], [x]) (mute)	<i>hotel</i>	Ҥ, h	/x/	<i>Hotel</i>
Ii	/i//j//j̊/	<i>internet</i>	Ӥ, i	/i/	<i>Internet</i>
Îî	/i/	<i>în</i>	-	-	
Jj	/ʒ/	<i>jeleu</i>	Ӥ, j	/j/	(<i>žele</i>)
Kk	/k/	<i>kilogram</i>	Ҝ, k	/k/	<i>kilogram, (kokos, kiosk)</i>
Ll	/l/	<i>leu</i>	Ӆ, l	/l/, /w/	<i>Lev</i>
Mm	/m/	<i>muzeu</i>	Ӆ, m	/m/	<i>Muzej</i>
Nn	/n/	<i>nou</i>	Ӆ, n	/n/	<i>Nov</i>
Oo	/o//ə/, /ɔ/	<i>obraz</i>	Ӯ, o	/ɔ/, /o/	<i>Obraz</i>
Pp	/p/	<i>print</i>	Ӆ, p	/p/	<i>Princ</i>
Qq	/k/	<i>Quebec</i>	-	-	(<i>Kebek</i>)
Rr	/r/	<i>raťa</i>	Ӆ, r	/r/	<i>Raca</i>
Ss	/s/	<i>Slovenia</i>	Ӆ, s	/s/	<i>Slovenija</i>

Şş	/ʃ/	sah	Ş, š	/ʃ/	Šah
Tt	/t/	tobogan	T, t	/t/	Tobogan
Țt	/tʃ/	tar	-	-	(car)
Uu	/u//w//y/	ulijă	U, u	/u/	Ulica
Vv	/v/	veveriță	V, v	/v/, /w/	Veverica
Ww	/v//w//u/	weekend	-	-	(vikend)
Xx	/ks//gz/	Alex	-	-	Aleks
Yy	/i//j/	yo-yo	-	-	(jojo)
Zz	/z/	zid	Z, z	/z/	Zid
-	-		Ž, ž	/ʒ/	Žirafa

Table 1. Orthographic and Phonological Correspondences Between the Romanian and Slovenian Alphabets

6. Didactic Games Based on Intercomprehension Between Romanian and Slovene

The foundation of the didactic games developed within the project consists of a carefully selected lexical base of 65 Romanian words that are either phonetically identical or highly similar to their Slovene equivalents. This linguistic proximity facilitates a natural introduction to Romanian for Slovene speakers through intercomprehension.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants are promised that by the end of the activity, they will be able to recognize and understand at least 50 Romanian words—a goal that motivates and empowers them. The lexical set includes terms such as: *apartament/ apartma* (apartment), *avion/ avion* (airplane), *babă/ baba* (old woman), *banană/ banana* (banana), *bancă/ banka* (bank), *bluză/ bluza* (blouse), *cadă/ kad* (bathtub), *cantină/ kantina* (canteen), *ceai/ čaj* (tea), *ceas/ ura* (clock, but čas in Slovene means time), *chioșc/ kiosk* (kiosk), *chelnăriță/ kelnarica* (waitress), *ciocolată/ čokolada* (chocolate), *cocoș/ kokoš* (rooster/ găină), *coș/ koš* (basket), *director/ direktor* (director), *document/ dokument* (document), *evidență/ evidentno* (obvious), *film/ film* (film), *fotoliu/ fotelj* (armchair), *frizer/ frizer* (hairdresser), *garaj/ garaža* (garage), *girafă/ žirafa* (giraffe), *groaznic/ grozen* (terrible), *gunoi/ gnoj* (garbage), *haide/ aide* (let's go), *hotel/ hotel* (hotel), *inginer/ inženir* (engineer), *internet/ internet* (internet), *leu/ lev* (lion), *limonadă/ limonada* (lemonade), *lopată/ lopata* (shovel), *mamă/ mama* (mother), *muzeu/ muzej* (museum), *nou/ nov* (new), *obraz/ obraz* (face), *operă/ opera* (opera), *poliție/ policija* (police), *poștăriță/ poštarka* (postwoman), *print/ princ* (prince), *rată/ raca* (duck), *recepție/ recepcija* (reception),

šah/ šah (chess), šcoală/ šola (school), šofer/ šofer (driver), šuncă/ šunka (ham), služba/ služba (job), spaghetti/ špageti (spaghetti), student/ študent (student), taxi/ taksi (taxi), tobogan/ tobogan (slide), tort/ torta (cake), targ/ sejem (fair), tar/ car (king/ tsar), uliță/ ulica (alley), uniformă/ uniforma (uniform), veveriță/ veverica (squirrel), vin/ vino (wine), zebră/ zebra (zebra), zid/ zid (wall).

To practice reading, pronunciation, and vocabulary acquisition, six educational games were created and implemented in the workshops. These games aim not only to teach Romanian vocabulary but also to raise awareness of grapheme-phoneme correspondences and promote metalinguistic reflection (Huțanu, Jieanu 2019).

6.1.Card-Based Matching Game

Objective: Identify graphic and phonetic similarities and differences between Romanian and Slovene words.

Method: Each participant or team of up to four players receives two sets of 20 cards—one set with images, the other with corresponding words. Players must correctly match the images with the corresponding Romanian words. In larger groups, teams compete, and the winner is the first to complete the task accurately. Afterward, participants read the words aloud with the teacher's assistance and discuss pronunciation patterns and reading rules they observed during the game.

6.2.Digital Matching Game Using Wordwall

Objectives: Reinforce reading and comprehension through digital interaction.

Method: 40 Romanian words (including those from the previous game) are uploaded to the Wordwall platform, each associated with an image. Players join via a QR code and must match the images to the correct Romanian word. Depending on age, the number of items per set can be adjusted (4, 10, or 20). The winner is the first to finish the task with no mistakes. At the end, the game coordinator or winner reads the words aloud to reinforce vocabulary and reading fluency.

These two games efficiently introduce grapheme–phoneme correspondences, while also fostering metalinguistic awareness, plurilingual strategies, and learner confidence.

6.3.Ludo– Vocabulary Board Game

Objective: Acquire Romanian vocabulary of Slavic origin.

Method: Participants play in groups of three or four (or one-on-one with the instructor). Each chooses a pawn and rolls a die to move along the board. Upon landing, they must say the Romanian word associated with the image in that space. The winner is the first to reach the end and correctly identify all words encountered.

6.4. Reading Game with Flashcards

Objectives: Practice reading skills and consolidate vocabulary.

Method: Groups of four receive a sealed envelope containing all 65 Romanian lexical cards. Participants have two minutes to familiarize themselves with the words by reading them aloud in their groups. Then, a competition is organized: each group member takes turns reading one card aloud, ensuring they do not repeat any word already read by other teams. This game encourages focused attention and supports active vocabulary retrieval (Jieanu 2020: 48).

6.5. Cultural Knowledge Game: *Romania* – Crossword Puzzle

Objective: Learn general knowledge facts about Romania.

Method: Participants receive a worksheet with a crossword puzzle and six multiple-choice questions in Slovene. After selecting the correct answers, they locate them in the crossword grid (horizontal, vertical, or diagonal). Topics include the capital of Romania, language family, national flag colors, the most famous vampire, historical links between Slovenia and Romania (e.g., Transylvania's past under Habsburg rule), and wildlife repopulation (e.g., bears brought to Slovenia from Romania).

6.6. Kahoot Culture Quiz

Objective: Reinforce cultural knowledge through digital gamification.

Method: We entered the same six questions from the crossword into the Kahoot platform. Participants join the quiz by scanning a QR code and then answer the questions in real time. The winners are those who respond both correctly and quickly.

7. Discussion

The results of this study reinforce a growing body of literature that advocates for the integration of game-based learning in foreign language education. The use of physical and digital games to support Romanian language acquisition across a diverse age range proved not only pedagogically effective but also affectively engaging for learners. The data collected through direct participation and feedback demonstrate that game-based activities—whether physical board games, word puzzles, or digital quiz platforms—enhanced learner motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural familiarity.

The variety of participants—ranging from preschoolers (aged 4–6) to older adults (aged 60–78)—allowed the study to explore how educational games function across age groups and learning contexts. The high level of engagement observed among children aged 9–14, who formed the core demographic (382 participants), suggests that this age group is particularly responsive to learning through games. However, adolescents, university students, and senior participants also displayed interest and engagement, especially in intergenerational workshops where collaborative learning occurred naturally.

The diversity of game formats used—such as *Ludo*, a card-based matching game, digital tools like Wordwall and Kahoot, and culturally infused crossword puzzles—enabled learners to approach the Romanian language from multiple angles: spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural references. Notably, the rebus puzzles elicited 262 completed responses, indicating sustained interest and a strong cognitive challenge. Similarly, digital tools like Kahoot, which was played 35 times, often in group settings, allowed for immediate feedback and collaborative dynamics that reinforced learning. Although we initially assumed that participants—particularly children accustomed to frequent smartphone use—would prefer digital games over physical ones, the practical implementation of the workshops revealed the opposite. Many participants, including school-aged children, showed a marked preference for physical, card-based games. One possible explanation for this outcome is that mobile phone use is typically restricted within school environments, which may have influenced learners' enthusiasm for non-digital formats. Nevertheless, it was particularly noteworthy that even children who had access to smartphones chose to engage with the physical matching games rather than the equivalent digital version delivered via Wordwall. This unexpected preference highlights the continued pedagogical value and appeal of tactile, face-to-face interaction in educational game design.

A recurring observation across workshops was the participants' tendency to alternate between or combine both analog and digital formats. This alternation/combination highlights a key pedagogical insight: giving learners the autonomy to choose their preferred mode of interaction can foster both motivation and deeper engagement. While digital formats offered flexibility, adaptive pacing, and instant feedback, physical games supported tactile learning, face-to-face communication, and group dynamics—particularly valued in primary and intergenerational contexts.

Beyond the affective and motivational impact, the linguistic outcomes of the game-based activities were also significant. Across all six games presented in the workshops, participants first learned to identify and correctly pronounce the distinctive Romanian graphemes *ă, â, ș, ț*, as well as letter clusters such as *ce, ci, ge, gi, che, chi, ghe, and ghi*. Mastery of these features facilitated the development of early decoding skills in Romanian, even among complete beginners.

Participants were then able to match written Romanian words with images, recognizing homophonic correspondences with Slovene (e.g., *ceai*/čaj [tea], *raťa*/*raca* [duck], *suncă*/šunka [ham]). This awareness triggered linguistic reflection and intercultural comparisons, with many learners expressing surprise that Romanian—despite being a Romance language—shares substantial lexical overlap with Slavic languages. Through intercomprehension-based play, participants acquired over 50 Romanian words in approximately 30 minutes, demonstrating both the efficiency and depth of language input that well-designed games can deliver.

This rapid vocabulary uptake, coupled with the playful and low-pressure learning context, contributed significantly to learner motivation. Participants reported increased curiosity toward Romanian and expressed a desire to continue studying the language. Moreover, they developed a more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences among languages and language families, enhancing their metalinguistic awareness—particularly relevant for plurilingual learners in Central Europe.

The findings align with earlier research (Šifrar 2023; Wong & Yunus 2021; Ibrahim 2017), emphasizing that educational games reduce anxiety and foster an enjoyable, low-stakes environment conducive to language learning. In line with Huizinga's (1949) and Caillois' (1994) classical game theory, the element of voluntary play appears crucial in creating “authentic” learning moments—where learners engage not out of obligation, but out of genuine interest and curiosity.

However, the study also encountered certain limitations consistent with findings by Silva (2008) and Lah (2019). In some cases, technical constraints (e.g., classroom setup, internet connectivity, or group size) affected the smooth implementation of games, particularly digital ones. Moreover, some participants—especially among older students and teachers—initially expressed concern that game-based learning might trivialize academic content. These perceptions gradually shifted as participants recognized the structured, goal-oriented nature of the games used.

Finally, the comparative approach of offering both physical and digital versions of similar activities revealed that neither format was inherently superior, for the effectiveness depended on context, learner preference, and the quality of facilitation. The equality of digital and physical activities reinforces the argument that games should not be viewed as a one-size-fits-all solution, but as flexible pedagogical tools to be adapted thoughtfully within curricular and extracurricular frameworks.

8. Conclusions

The findings of this study underline the pedagogical potential of both physical and digital games in supporting Romanian language acquisition across a wide range

of age groups and learner profiles. Participants not only demonstrated improved decoding skills—particularly regarding distinctive Romanian phonemes and graphemes such as *ă, â, ș, ț*, and consonant clusters (*che, chi, ghe, ghi, ce, ci, ge, gi*)—but also developed intercultural awareness through interlinguistic connections with Slovene and other Slavic languages. This approach enabled the rapid acquisition of over 50 Romanian words in as little as 30 minutes of gameplay, showcasing the efficiency of game-based learning rooted in intercomprehension strategies.

An important and somewhat unexpected result was the clear preference expressed by many learners—especially children—for physical over digital games. Despite assumptions that digital formats would dominate due to young participants' familiarity with screens, hands-on, tangible game formats elicited more engagement. This preference may be attributed to contextual factors (e.g., mobile phone restrictions in schools) but also suggests a broader need for physical interaction, social play, and embodied learning in language education.

Beyond vocabulary acquisition, the games cultivated learner motivation, curiosity, and confidence. Participants reported increased willingness to study Romanian in the future and expressed a deeper awareness of both the similarities and differences between Romance and Slavic languages. Furthermore, intergenerational workshops demonstrated that game-based learning is inclusive, offering meaningful engagement for older adults and university students alongside children and teenagers.

In light of these results, we advocate for the continued integration of educational games—both physical and digital—into language learning curricula. When carefully designed and implemented, such tools not only enhance linguistic competence but also promote social interaction, intercultural dialogue, and learner autonomy. Future research could further explore how hybrid game formats (blending digital and physical elements) might optimize engagement and learning outcomes across varied educational contexts.

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