

**Intercultural didactic discourse in the relationship between
students and Romanian as a foreign language**

Angela POPOVICI

Dunarea de Jos University of Galați, Romania
Cross-Border Faculty (Angela.Popovici@ugal.ro)

Abstract

The present article investigates didactic discourse in Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) classes, focusing on the communicative dissonance observed in interactions between the teaching staff and international students. The research originates from the observation that, in the absence of adequate mediation, the academic message is received in fragments, creating an asymmetry between the sender's intention and the receiver's decoding capacity.

The methodology is applied in nature, based on a case study conducted at the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați. For data collection, two semi-structured questionnaires were employed, administered to a sample of 27 Ukrainian students and 7 faculty members. These instruments enabled precise identification of points of blockage and affective barriers that impede fluent verbal interaction. The study demonstrates that the success of language acquisition in the university environment imperatively depends on the use of mediation strategies and identity validation within the didactic discourse.

The research results, grounded in the analysis of the learning experience and student perception, confirm that a didactic discourse centered on mediation strategies constitutes the determining factor in reducing psychological resistance and increasing the efficiency of verbal interaction during courses.

Keywords: RFL, intercultural didactic discourse, language barrier, communicational dissonance, mediation strategies, identity validation, academic integration.

Introduction

The current geopolitical context has generated a massive wave of refugees, including youth and students from Ukraine, who, for reasons of safety and academic continuity, were forced to pursue their studies outside the borders of their home country. For these subjects, enrollment in the Romanian Language Preparatory Program represents a critical stage in reconfiguring their professional trajectory within the host university. Under these circumstances, teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL) acquires multiple dimensions: it is no longer reduced to the transmission of linguistic knowledge, but necessarily involves an intercultural didactic discourse, capable of capitalizing on the cultural diversity of the student group, fostering empathy, and diminishing linguistic and affective barriers. Particularly, the relationship between teacher and students becomes a field of symbolic negotiation, in which didactic language must integrate differences in cultural codes, learning styles, and identity contexts. This discursive dynamic becomes the foundation upon which the success of their subsequent integration into specialized faculties

is built, transforming the classroom from a simple instructional space into a laboratory of academic resilience.

The specialized literature (Byram 2021; Kramsch 1998; Gay 2010; Platon 2019) substantiates the idea that the development of intercultural competence constitutes the central pillar of the educational act in the university environment. Within this paradigm, teaching Romanian as a foreign language transcends the mere transmission of grammatical rules, becoming a process of mediation between the student's linguistic universe and their new academic environment. Intercultural competence thus represents the foundation of authentic communication, in which the teacher facilitates, alongside vocabulary, the understanding of the subtle cultural contexts that accompany any act of language.

The need to prioritize this dimension stems from the fact that didactic interaction is, in essence, an encounter between different identities. When the teacher's discourse integrates elements of validation and openness to the group's cultural specificity, the Romanian class becomes a space for intellectual cooperation. This approach allows the student to construct a new academic profile, providing the necessary tools to progress successfully toward undergraduate studies. Consequently, intercultural competence is what ensures the balance between linguistic rigor and the need for recognizing the individuality of each learner in their learning journey.

However, translating this vast theoretical support into the immediate practice of the classroom often reveals discrepancies between curricular exigencies and the reality of human interaction. Despite a solid theoretical framework, there is a gap regarding the concrete application of these principles in teaching Romanian to students. From this perspective, the present study aims to investigate how intercultural didactic discourse is constructed, perceived, and received within RFL classes intended for refugee students from Ukraine.

Through this research, the article aims to contribute to the development of an applied intercultural pedagogy, sensitive to the needs of refugees, and to offer recommendations for optimizing the teaching of the Romanian language in a multicultural setting. Consequently, didactic discourse becomes an instrument for reconstructing trust, belonging, and hope.

Research problem

The present research is based on the premise of a communicative asymmetry between the conventional discursive strategies of the teaching staff and the fragile psycho-emotional profile of the refugee student. While pedagogical discourse tends to focus on a purely functional dimension—aiming at the transfer of grammatical and lexical units—the urgent needs of the Ukrainian subject demand recognition of identity prior to any effective act of learning.

These premises lead to the formulation of the research problem: What are the optimal methodological and discursive conditions for developing communicative competence among refugee students within RFL classes, in a manner that is personalized, empathetic, and adapted to current imperatives of academic integration and social resilience?

Research hypothesis

If didactic discourse is strategically centered on intercultural mediation and identity security (by activating the *savoir-être* component), then a significant reduction in affective

barriers occurs, stimulating the rate of Romanian language acquisition and ensuring the successful transition of refugee students toward university studies.

Methodology

The current investigative endeavor is applied and exploratory in nature, grounded in the observation and qualitative analysis of verbal interaction within RFL classes. The research sample consisted of 27 Ukrainian students enrolled in the Preparatory Year for Romanian language learning at the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania, and 7 faculty members with experience in teaching Romanian as a foreign language.

For data collection, semi-structured questionnaires were administered to both students and teaching staff to assess perceptions of didactic discourse and communication barriers.

The working procedure involved the systematic recording of students' reactions and perceptions regarding the messages conveyed by the instructors. The effectiveness of discursive strategies was evaluated by the extent of reductions in affective barriers and the enhancement of intercultural communication fluidity. The entire data processing procedure strictly adhered to the norms of academic ethics and confidentiality, with the data being utilized exclusively to substantiate the conclusions of the present study.

The Issue of Discourse in an Intercultural Context

In a broad sense, discourse refers to any form of verbal or non-verbal communication used to convey information, influence, argue, or reveal ideas. Michel Foucault (1971, pp. 10-12), in his foundational works, defines discourse as a set of utterances that produce reality and are regulated by social and cultural norms. From this perspective, didactic discourse is not a mere transmission of information but a construction of reality; for a refugee, for example, the Romanian teacher's discourse represents the first "institution" they encounter, serving a major ontological function in the adaptation process.

Complementarily, researcher Teun A. van Dijk (2008, pp. 15–17) defines discourse as a process of producing and understanding a message within a specific social and cultural context, influenced by factors such as social status, power, norms, and ideologies. In his view, discourse reflects and shapes social relations, acting as a complex mechanism for information and positioning.

In an educational context, intercultural didactic discourse is an essential means of transmitting knowledge and a tool for fostering a climate in which linguistic and cultural barriers can be overcome.

In a narrow sense, intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and respectfully in diverse contexts, and intercultural didactic discourse entails adapting language and communication strategies to facilitate mutual understanding. Michael Byram (2021, pp. 44–49) proposes a model of intercultural communicative competence known as the five "savoirs" (Fig. 1).

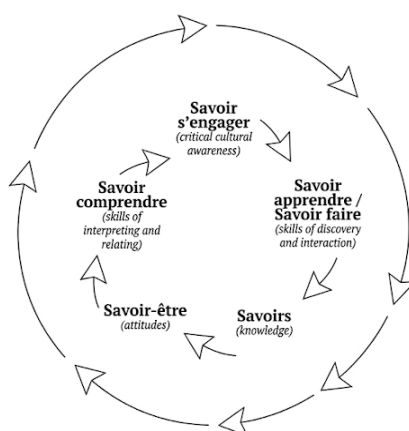


Figure 1. The Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

(Byram 2021, p. 46)

The model defines this competence as an integrated set of knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for ethical interaction in diverse cultural contexts. Each "savoir" contributes to a profound understanding of differences, thereby facilitating empathy. The relationships between these components are not linear but interdependent and dynamic, underscoring the importance of language learning alongside a critical awareness of one's own cultural values and those of others. Byram asserts that language teaching cannot be limited to the transmission of grammatical structures; it must be accompanied by an understanding of diversity, with the teacher guiding students to interact consciously across varying norms.

An essential perspective on educational communication is offered by the linguist Eugeniu Coșeriu through the concept of "expressive competence." He defines discourse as a particular content called *meaning* and a technique based on secure and intuitive knowledge: "knowing how to speak in determined situations, about certain things, with certain people—that is, knowing how to construct discourses" (Coșeriu 2009, p. 238). Coșeriu highlights that communication effectiveness depends on the speaker's ability to adjust their message to the linguistic and cultural competences of the audience. Coherence in the didactic act emerges when the teacher utilizes systematically organized instructional language adapted to the students' needs, thus linking expressive competence to the requirement for their recognition.

At the same time, Pierre Bourdieu (1991, pp. 107–110), in his theory of symbolic capital, maintains that didactic discourse is an instrument for forming and legitimizing the teacher's authority, shaping the educational identities of both actors involved. Intercultural discourse, in the view of researcher Claire Kramsch (1998, pp. 65–71), presupposes both communication between cultures and the awareness and integration of differences within a framework of mutual learning, emphasizing that learning a language is indissolubly linked to understanding the values that define it.

The concept of intercultural didactic discourse can be defined from several perspectives, given its interactive nature. Anne-Brit Fenner (2001, pp. 22–26), in her works on intercultural pedagogy, defines it as a discourse that transcends mere language learning and actively addresses diversity, creating an open educational space where cultural differences are a resource rather than a barrier. Rodica Zafiu (2001, p. 13) argues that in this form of communication, language serves as a medium for learning about diversity, and the discourse must be sensitive to each student's cultural context to foster empathy.

Michael Byram (2021, pp. 51–53) reiterates the idea that this discourse plays a dual role: transmitting linguistic knowledge and encouraging respect for diversity through specific linguistic techniques. Furthermore, Geneva Gay (2010, pp. 21–23) states that it is essential for teachers to integrate strategies that respond to the needs of students from diverse cultures, as they bring with them distinct languages and ways of understanding the world.

Based on these theories, we deduce that intercultural didactic discourse constitutes a fundamental dimension of education in multicultural contexts, and the language teacher's discourse must be flexible and adaptable. In higher education, the activity of teachers of Romanian as a Foreign Language must focus on assimilating and capitalizing on these dimensions, promoting an inclusive education that reflects the cultural pluralism of the university environment and contributes to the genuine development of intercultural communication competences.

Challenges of Intercultural Didactic Discourse

While theoretical foundations outline the ideal framework for dialogue, educational practice reveals numerous communication barriers that can distort the didactic relationship. Despite integrative intentions, contemporary globalized education faces the *language barrier* as a major challenge, which can generate marginalization for students who have not yet mastered the host country's language. In this regard, Geneva Gay (2010, pp. 31–34) argues that intercultural teaching strategies must transcend simple terminological translation, aiming instead to create a framework in which students feel validated and respected in their diverse identities.

A profound structural barrier is signaled by Robert Phillipson (1992, pp. 46–47) through the concept of "linguistic imperialism." He warns that the norms and values of the dominant language might impose a hierarchy of cultures, subtly excluding minorities. In this context, didactic discourse must recognize and validate the plurality of voices, ensuring that the Romanian language is perceived not merely as an instrument of assimilation, but as a medium for adaptation and the reconstruction of identities. Thus, an asymmetry of status emerges that must be managed through discourse, transforming the language into a space of negotiation rather than imposition.

In the concrete application of intercultural pedagogy, Anne-Brit Fenner (2001, pp. 37–39) emphasizes the necessity of a *dialogic space* between educational actors. The teacher ceases to be a mere transmitter of linguistic units and becomes a cultural mediator who facilitates dialogue between different systems of reference. This approach presupposes greater flexibility in managing classroom diversity, in which culture is actively integrated through the ongoing exploration of similarities and differences in every learning sequence.

Intercultural didactic discourse also includes adopting strategies to mitigate differences in communication styles and social norms. Claire Kramsch (1998, pp. 82–84) argues that these strategies include open-ended questions, constructive feedback, and collaborative methods intended to encourage students to express themselves from their own cultural perspective. These techniques promote dialogue and develop *intercultural empathy*, which is essential in deconstructing perceptual barriers. Furthermore, research by Rick Iedema (2003, pp. 15–18) highlights the social dimension of communication, emphasizing that discourse can contribute to redefining the identities of both participants in the didactic act. In this sense, Constantin Cucos (2000, pp. 165–168) underlines that teacher training must be carried out in the spirit of a pedagogy sensitive to cultural context, with intercultural training becoming a necessity for an equitable environment. However, Elena Platon (2019, pp. 41–42) warns that in Romania, this training risks remaining at a superficial theoretical level.

Nevertheless, our results partially contradict this concern, indicating that when working with vulnerable groups (refugees), teachers transcend the theoretical framework and apply concrete mediation strategies.

This practice is in consonance with the provisions of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2020, pp. 123–126), which defines intercultural competence as the ability to manage misunderstandings and establish links between one's own culture and that of the interlocutor.

In conclusion, the issue of intercultural didactic discourse is marked by the tension between the necessity of linguistic adaptation and the risk of identifying a dominant culture in education. Challenges related to communication barriers and trauma (in the case of refugees) or divergent cultural codes require teachers to become effective cultural mediators. They must create an inclusive educational environment in which discourse serves to validate each student's identity, thereby laying the groundwork for the applied analysis in the subsequent case studies.

A major challenge highlighted by our research is the recognition that didactic discourse is a space charged with values, intentionalities, and identity positionings. This lack of neutrality transforms the act of teaching into a continuous negotiation between the host country's linguistic norm and the student's universe of reference. Overcoming communication barriers is not achieved solely through expressive techniques; it requires the teacher's conscious involvement, who must demonstrate empathy and openness toward students so that communication becomes a means by which they feel understood and valued. Thus, the challenge lies in the educator's capacity to manage their own subjectivity to build a relationship of trust—an essential premise for the results we will analyze in the case study.

Results

The research involved a sample of 7 faculty members who teach Romanian at the Cross-Border Faculty of the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania. The instrument employed was a structured questionnaire focusing on the dimensions of perception and strategies of intercultural didactic discourse. The collected data are synthesized in Table 1.

Table 1. Perceptions and strategies regarding intercultural didactic discourse

Question	Response Options	Frequency
What strategies do you use most frequently to support students' cultural understanding?	Examples from the culture of origin Comparative discussions between cultures Interactive activities	1 / 2 / 4
How do you evaluate the level of difficulty in didactic communication with refugee students?	Effective communication Manageable difficulties Frequent difficulties	0 / 7 / 0
What intercultural obstacles have you observed most often in the classroom?	Behavioral codes RFL expression difficulties Reservations in expressing personal opinions	2 / 4 / 1
What methods do you consider most effective for the intercultural integration of students?	Collaborative projects among students Intercultural content in lessons Affective and empathetic climate in the classroom	3 / 1 / 3

How do you assess the openness of refugee students toward Romanian cultural diversity?	They manifest interest and curiosity They adapt gradually, but with reservations They are reluctant toward local cultural values	4 / 3 / 0
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The frequency analysis indicates a clear orientation of the teaching staff toward participatory methods. The majority of respondents prefer *interactive activities*, which are considered essential instruments for facilitating cultural understanding. This choice suggests an approach to discourse that values dialogue. The use of comparative discussions and references to the student's culture of origin completes this picture, demonstrating an attempt to connect new linguistic content with the student's pre-existing identity.

Regarding the fluidity of the didactic act, all 7 professors define communication difficulties as *moderate and manageable*. This perception confirms the previously advanced hypothesis: didactic discourse is not an automatic process but a continuous negotiation that requires constant adaptation. The primary barrier identified remains the linguistic one; however, misunderstandings related to behavioral codes underscore the necessity of a profound familiarization with the norms of the Romanian academic environment.

The teacher's subjective effort, mentioned in the theoretical sections as being essential, is reflected in the balance between the preference for *collaborative projects* and the creation of an *affective/empathetic climate*. The fact that only one teacher opted for the simple inclusion of intercultural content in lessons demonstrates that experiential and relational strategies are considered far more effective than strictly curricular ones. This approach reconfirms the importance of the affective dimension in the students' integration process. The students' openness is evaluated positively, as the absence of any reluctance creates the conditions for real linguistic progress.

Although teachers identify the language barrier as a major obstacle, prioritising an affective and empathetic climate as a means of integration demonstrates that didactic discourse emphasises an empathetic attitude. This approach by the faculty confirms the discourse hypothesis: the teacher modulates a space of emotional security.

Furthermore, the analyses indicate that the discourse of the professors at the "Dunărea de Jos" University tends to construct what the specialized literature calls the "Third Space." In interaction with refugee students, the discourse does not merely impose the Romanian cultural norm, nor does it remain confined to the Ukrainian one; instead, it generates a hybrid space of academic and social survival. This *safe space* is evident in the preference for interactive activities, which allow for the negotiation of meaning within a protected framework in which linguistic error is secondary to the need for identity expression.

The teachers' focus on form sets the stage for a revealing discrepancy regarding student perceptions. While the teacher tends to diagnose the obstacle through the lens of linguistic competence, subsequent results will show whether the student perceives the same barrier or if, conversely, their emphasis falls on deciphering cultural meaning and context. Based on the research and academic experience, the following directions are proposed for optimizing didactic discourse:

- The use of role-playing to simulate real social contexts.
- The use of authentic Romanian materials that reflect social pluralism.
- The integration of project-based learning to allow for personal expression and cultural mentorship.

- Structuring content into small units, adapted to the refugees' stress levels and linguistic barriers.

The research was extended to a group of 27 refugee students from Ukraine, enrolled at the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați. The questionnaire focused on self-assessment of linguistic difficulties and on the subjective perception of interactions with Romanian professors in an intercultural context.

Table 2. Learning experience and perception of didactic discourse

Question	Response Options	Frequency
What are the greatest difficulties in learning the Romanian language?	Vocabulary and grammar Pronunciation and expression Understanding the cultural context and examples	10 / 7 / 10
How do you feel in your relationship with Romanian professors?	Open and supportive Correct (minor difficulties) Distant (cultural differences)	23 / 4 / 0
How do you react when you do not understand a cultural element mentioned by the professor?	I ask for clarifications I try to understand through context I avoid involvement	21 / 5 / 1
What types of activities helped you the most in cultural integration?	Media materials (films/songs) Free discussions with Romanian professors and students Participation in intercultural events	10 / 15 / 2
How do you perceive the teaching style of Romanian professors?	Interactive and adapted to our needs Useful (sometimes complicated) Difficult (pace/language)	22 / 2 / 3

The results obtained through this second research instrument corroborate perspectives on the mediation process, providing a rigorous empirical foundation for the study's conclusions. A primary major discrepancy is observed regarding the identified obstacles: while the teaching staff tends to prioritize "form," the students place vocabulary and cultural context on the same level. This suggests that for the refugee student, deciphering cultural meaning is as important as assimilating lexicon, confirming that didactic discourse must function as a translator of social realities. The success of the teachers' mediation strategy is reflected in the majority of students who describe the relationship as open and supportive; most choose to ask for clarification, indicating that they feel in a *safe space*.

Another revealing result is the students' preference for *free discussions* over intercultural projects. While teachers considered collaborative projects as important as empathy, the students indicated that direct, spontaneous interaction is what truly facilitates integration. This aspect underscores the importance of a flexible didactic discourse, capable of deviating from standardized models of expression to meet the immediate communication needs of refugees.

In conclusion, although vocabulary and contextual barriers remain significant, the teaching style is perceived as interactive and adapted. The success of these students' integration depends on the teacher's ability to maintain this balance between linguistic rigor and cultural flexibility, valuing identity plurality as a resource rather than an obstacle.

The comparative analysis reveals an asymmetry between didactic strategies and their reception: while the teaching staff prioritizes structured simulations, students identify *free dialogue* as the most effective vector for integration. This divergence suggests that the need for authentic communication prevails over standard exercises, confirming that mediation occurs at the intersection between the teacher's formal structure and the student's need for meaning. To synthesize the dynamics of these interactions and how the empirical data correlate with Byram's model of intercultural competence, we have developed Figure 2.

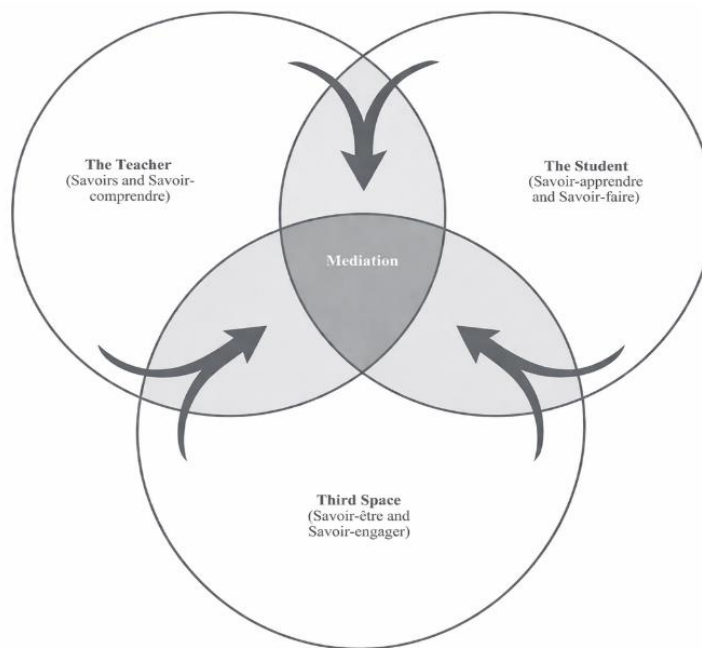


Figure 2. The Model of Perception Mediation in RFL Discourse

The model illustrates the interdependence of the components of intercultural competence within the configuration of didactic discourse addressed to foreign students. *The Teacher* segment groups the cognitive and interpretative dimensions (*Savoirs*, *Savoir-comprendre*), while *the Student* segment reflects the processes of acquisition and interaction (*Savoir-apprendre*, *Savoir-faire*).

The intersection zone, defined as the *Third Space*, is grounded in the affective and engagement dimensions (*Savoir-être*, *Savoir-engager*) and constitutes the core of the *Mediation* process. The professor ultimately mediates the discourse by reconfiguring their presence in the dialogue. In this *Third Space*, the educator ceases to be a mere emitter of norms and becomes an architect of trust.

Mediation occurs when the professor adjusts their discourse to make room for the student's "voice," transforming the power asymmetry into a partnership of meaning. This mediation is achieved through participatory reformulation techniques, by accepting silence as cognitive processing time, and by constantly anchoring Romanian concepts in the students' original cultural landmarks. Thus, the professor constructs a symbolic refuge where the student feels safe to explore the new academic reality.

Discussion

Although the sample size (27 subjects) orients the research toward an intensive qualitative analysis, the study offers fundamental benchmarks for understanding the mechanisms of discourse adaptation. A necessary future direction is to extend the research to groups of students from diverse geocultural areas to nuance how mediation strategies respond to specific cultural barriers. This approach would allow for a comparison between the learning trajectories of refugee students and those of students in academic mobility, offering a unified vision of *identity security* within the Romanian university environment.

Conclusions

The research demonstrates that intercultural didactic discourse constitutes the ontological foundation of students' integration into the university environment. The results highlight the imperative transition from a *pedagogy of form* to a *pedagogy of identity reconstruction*, within which the Romanian language becomes the fundamental space for the manifestation of the academic self.

The findings confirm the theses of Platon (2019, p. 42) regarding the necessity of transitioning toward interaction practices adapted to the university psycholinguistic profile. Furthermore, the openness reported by the students validates the *empathy paradigm* advocated by Cucoș (2000, pp. 165–168): the educational environment is an ecosystem for valorizing alterity, where intercultural didactic discourse neutralizes "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson (1992, pp. 46–47).

The research results confirm the hypothesis that the strategic centering of discourse on intercultural mediation and identity security—by activating the *savoir-être* dimension—produces a significant reduction in communication barriers, thereby facilitating the students' successful transition into the university academic environment.

The main contribution of this paper consists of the theoretical modeling of interaction through the lens of the five dimensions of intercultural competence formulated by Byram (2021). The validation of the Third Space concept, as applied by Kramsch (1998) confirms that the success of the educational trajectory is conditioned by the teaching staff's ability to transmute the linguistic norm into the *savoir-être* dimension. The results indicate a direct correlation between mediation strategies and increased learning efficiency, offering an applied perspective on how didactic discourse validates the student's academic presence.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses her sincere gratitude to "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania, for providing the framework to conduct this study within the Cross-Border Faculty (Department of Social and Human Sciences). Heartfelt thanks are extended to the Ukrainian students enrolled in the Romanian preparatory year for their essential participation. Furthermore, the author wishes to thank her colleagues for fostering a supportive professional environment and for their valuable collegial assistance throughout the research process.

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